

# **A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines**

## *A Grounded Theory Study of Understandings of the Atonement Among Evangelical Christians*

Jeremy H. Sievers

A thesis submitted  
in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Theology and Religion  
University of Otago, Dunedin  
New Zealand.  
30 June 2017



## **Abstract**

**Aim:** To explore evangelical Christians' understanding of the atonement and establish whether there is a relationship between different ideas of the atonement and wellbeing in the lives of participants.

**Methods:** Christians were recruited through church newsletter advertisements from churches that identified as being evangelical. Participants each took part in a semistructured interview lasting between sixty and ninety minutes. Using constructivist grounded theory, the resulting data was analysed until theoretical saturation was reached.

**Findings:** The initial finding was that the specific beliefs participants held about the atonement did not appear to be a predominant factor related to their wellbeing. Instead, reports from participants implicated other factors as being more significant, particularly their early experiences in life. However, as Grounded Theory Methodology is an emergent research method, data analysis led to the construction of the theory, "A Christian life: living across the lines." This substantive theory is composed of two main categories: "Living between the lines" and "Patterns in the thinking space." The theory explains that while participants had expectations of a life of faith that was prescribed as being between the lines, or boundaries, of beliefs, a majority of participants had spent some time, and for some, significant time, outside the lines and in what the theory describes as a "thinking space."

**Conclusions:** It is proposed that rather than understanding Christian life as defined by a narrow set of boundaries around beliefs and actions, it is preferable to expand that understanding to encompass the wider experience of participants, whose lives wove in and out of the lines, experiencing God both inside and outside the lines. Findings from this study raised questions about the level of awareness of the different theories of the atonement that have been important to Christian belief over the centuries. In general, participants were reasonably ill-informed about the range of atonement images and theories. In particular, recent vigorous debate about the atonement that has taken place in the academy seems to have had limited impact on what is disseminated at the local church level of the participants.





## Acknowledgements

I would like first to thank the brave people who volunteered to be participants in this research. The majority responded to a small advertisement in a church newsletter, contacting me and expressing interest in taking part. I am grateful for each of your responses, interest in this project and proactive willingness to make that first contact. In reflecting on the time spent with each participant, I was struck by the incredible privilege it has been to have listened to their stories, heard some of their triumphs and failures, and gained an insight into the ways that their faith has strengthened and encouraged them throughout all that life has held. At one level, my participants can be described as ordinary people, living ordinary lives. At another level, they are extraordinary people; brave enough to volunteer to meet with me as a stranger, to share their faith and life, and each with a remarkable story. I am so grateful to each one of you for opening your life to me for the purposes of this research.

I must also thank my two supervisors, who have kept me on the straight and narrow path to thesis completion and to whom I owe a great debt. In the early days of the research, I emailed Dr Barbara McKenzie-Green to ask for some help with grounded theory. At the time I was trying to learn grounded theory from reading the texts, which was proving a difficult task. Barbara graciously agreed to help me, and for two and a half years did so out of the goodness of her heart. Since becoming a formal supervisor for the last year of the project, Barbara has been a tower of wisdom and encouragement. I believe she may well know my data as well as I do, after many hours spent reading, analyzing, discussing and theorizing together. This thesis simply could not have happened without you. Professor Murray Rae has been an inspiration to me as a theologian, and as a human being, for more than thirty-five years now, and I was delighted when he took on the role of primary supervisor. Murray has walked with me through the challenge of writing this thesis, and more than academically supervising, he has been pastorally sensitive to some life/work challenges that were prominent for me during the early years of the research. I am also indebted to Murray for his incredibly detailed critiques as I have sent draft chapters in for discussion. His attention to detail, and years of experience in the academy have been invaluable. More importantly, Murray's superb, extensive theological wisdom has been invaluable in guiding my thinking, and reining me in when I have written from the heart but with looser attention

to theological sensitivities. Any theological rashness or waywardness that remains in the text is my fault entirely.

My thanks also to the University of Otago Doctoral Scholarships office for awarding the scholarship that has allowed me to complete this research. I am deeply grateful and I trust that this thesis does justice to the investment of the Scholarships office. I have a clear memory of the first day I sat at my desk following confirmation as a PhD candidate. At the time, I was working part-time in a church pastoral role, and I remember thinking enthusiastically that I should easily have the research completed within the three year time frame. Four years later, after some fairly eventful work/life changes, I've finally made it. It is said that writing a doctoral thesis is a "journey," and that has certainly been true in my case. I want to thank my wife, Lorraine, who has unflaggingly supported me in this journey, despite all the challenges that still being a student in your 50's entails. You have been my main supporter and best encourager – I promise that I will now finally stop being a student, though hopefully I will never stop being a learner. My thanks also to our four children, and their children, for your love, support and encouragement. You realize that a PhD takes a long time when three grandchildren are born along the way! Hopefully I can now have a little more time and energy for you all. A special thank you to my talented designer-daughter Melissa Bulkeley for her work on my two main theoretical diagrams.

## **Contents**

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgments	v
Contents	vii
List of Tables	xiv
List of Figures	xiv
List of Abbreviations	xiv

<b>Chapter 1. Introduction: Setting the Scene</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1.2 PERSONAL STATEMENT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>1.3 EVANGELICALISM</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1.4 THE INTERFACE OF PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>1.5 PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES</b>	<b>11</b>
1.5.1 OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY	11
1.5.2 ATTACHMENT THEORY	14
1.5.3 IMPLICIT RELATIONAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY	17
<b>1.6 THE RESEARCH QUESTION</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>1.7 THESIS STRUCTURE</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>1.8 LANGUAGE USED FOR GOD</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>1.9 SUMMARY</b>	<b>22</b>

<b>Chapter 2. Atonement Theology</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2.1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>2.2 THREE IMPORTANT CONCERNS</b>	<b>26</b>
2.2.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE	26
2.2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT	27
2.2.3 THE QUESTION OF GOD'S WRATH	29

<b>2.3 BIBLICAL MATERIALS</b>	<b>36</b>
2.3.1 OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES	36
2.3.1.1 Ransom – Release from Captivity	37
2.3.1.2 Sacrifice – Covering over Sin	38
2.3.1.3 The Day of Atonement – the Scapegoat	39
2.3.1.4 The Suffering Servant – Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12	41
2.3.1.5 Summary	45
2.3.2 NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES	45
2.3.2.1 The Gospels	45
2.3.2.2 Other New Testament Images	49
2.3.2.2.1 <i>Redemption</i>	50
2.3.2.2.2 <i>Sacrifice</i>	50
2.3.2.2.3 <i>Reconciliation</i>	52
2.3.2.2.4 <i>Justification</i>	52
2.3.2.2.5 <i>Adoption</i>	53
2.3.2.2.6 <i>Triumph over Evil</i>	53
2.3.2.2.7 <i>The Complexity of Mixed Metaphors</i>	54
2.3.2.3 Important Matters of Interpretation	55
2.3.2.3.1 <i>The Hilasterion</i>	55
2.3.2.3.2 <i>“For us” – The Question of Substitution</i>	60
2.3.2.3.3 <i>The Transaction Question</i>	62
<b>2.4 ATONEMENT THEORIES</b>	<b>64</b>
2.4.1 INTRODUCTION	64
2.4.2 CHRISTUS VICTOR	65
2.4.2.1 Ransom Theory	66
2.4.2.2 Recapitulation	67
2.4.2.3 Cosmic Battle	67
2.4.3 SATISFACTION THEORY	68
2.4.3.1 Anselm of Canterbury	68
2.4.3.2 Penal Substitution	70
2.4.3.3 Governmental Theory	76
2.4.4 MORAL INFLUENCE	77
<b>2.5 CONCLUSION</b>	<b>78</b>
 <b>Chapter 3. Grounded Theory: Methodology and Methods</b>	 <b>81</b>
3.1 INTRODUCTION	81
3.2 EARLY GROUNDED THEORISTS: GLASER, STRAUSS AND CORBIN	85
3.2.1 PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK	85

3.2.2 METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES	87
3.2.2.1 Position of the Researcher	87
3.2.2.2 Induction and Abduction	88
3.2.2.3 Emergence vs. Forcing	90
3.2.3 METHODS	93
3.2.3.1 Interviewing	93
3.2.3.2 Coding and Categorising	94
3.2.3.3 The Constant Comparative Method	96
3.2.3.4 Memoing	97
3.2.3.5 Theoretical Sampling	98
3.2.3.6 Core Category Development	99
3.2.3.7 Theoretical Construction and Integration	100
3.2.3.8 Criteria for Rigor	101
<b>3.3 CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY</b>	<b>103</b>
3.3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK	104
3.3.2 A QUESTION OF ONTOLOGY	107
3.3.3 METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES	108
3.3.3.1 Position of the Researcher	108
3.3.3.2 Induction and Abduction	110
3.3.3.3 Emergence vs. Forcing	111
3.3.4 METHODS	112
3.3.4.1 Interviewing	113
3.3.4.1.1 <i>Participant Selection Rationale</i>	114
3.3.4.1.2 <i>Ethics</i>	115
3.3.4.1.3 <i>The Interview Process</i>	115
3.3.4.1.4 <i>The Participants</i>	116
3.3.4.2 Initial Coding	118
3.3.4.3 Constant Comparative Analysis	120
3.3.4.4 Memoing	121
3.3.4.5 Methodological Decisions	121
3.3.4.6 Theoretical Construction and Integration	123
3.3.4.6.1 <i>Concept Development 1: Noticing Dichotomies</i>	123
3.3.4.6.2 <i>Concept Development 2: Conceptual Properties</i>	124
3.3.4.6.3 <i>Concept Development 3: Concepts of God</i>	124
3.3.4.6.4 <i>Concept Development 4: The Atonement Journey</i>	124
3.3.4.6.5 <i>Category Development: Living Between the Lines</i>	125
3.3.4.7 Criteria for Rigor	127
<b>3.4 CONCLUSION</b>	<b>128</b>

<b>Chapter 4. Research Findings: Overview</b>	
<b>A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines</b>	129
<b>4.1 INTRODUCTION</b>	129
<b>4.2 PARTICIPANT UNDERSTANDING OF THE ATONEMENT</b>	131
4.2.1 BIBLICAL METAPHORS AND ATONEMENT MODELS	131
4.2.2 UNCERTAINTY	133
4.2.3 THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE	134
4.2.3.1 The Problem Presented	134
4.2.3.2 Action Taken by Jesus	135
4.2.3.3 The Consequences	135
<b>4.3 LIVING ACROSS THE LINES: OVERVIEW</b>	136
<b>4.4 CONCLUSION</b>	140
 <b>Chapter 5. Research Findings 2: Living Between the Lines</b>	 143
<b>5.1 INTRODUCTION</b>	143
<b>5.2 PERSPECTIVES OF GOD</b>	143
5.2.1 GOD IS RELATIONAL	145
5.2.2 GOD IS RESTORATIVE	146
5.2.3 GOD IS EXCLUSIVE/UNATTAINABLE	146
5.2.4 GOD IS PUNITIVE	147
5.2.5 GOD IS CONDITIONAL	148
<b>5.3 PARTICIPANT THEOLOGIES</b>	149
5.3.1 THE PROBLEM: THE GULF BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY	150
5.3.2 A PERSONAL PROBLEM	152
5.3.3 AN EXCLUSIVE SOLUTION	154
5.3.4 THE COST OF FOLLOWING	156
<b>5.4 LIVING BETWEEN THE LINES</b>	158

5.4.1 MAINTAINING THE BOUNDARIES	161
<b>5.5 CONCLUSION</b>	<b>161</b>
<b>Chapter 6: Research Findings 3: Patterns in the Thinking Space</b>	
<b>6.1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>6.2 CONDITIONS OF DISCONNECTION: LIFE OUTSIDE THE LINES</b>	<b>164</b>
6.2.1 NON-CONFORMITY	165
6.2.2 LIFE STAGES	166
6.2.3 UNMET EXPECTATIONS	167
6.2.4 ISOLATION	169
6.2.5 CRISIS	170
<b>6.3 THE THINKING SPACE</b>	<b>170</b>
<b>6.4 STRATEGIES</b>	<b>173</b>
6.4.1 DURATION	173
6.4.2 INTENSITY	175
6.4.3 FOCUS	176
<b>6.5 CONDITIONS FOR RECONNECTION</b>	<b>178</b>
6.5.1 CRISIS	179
6.5.2 INVITATION	180
<b>6.6 THE THINKING SPACE: RECONNECTION</b>	<b>180</b>
<b>6.7 STRATEGIES</b>	<b>182</b>
<b>6.8 CONCLUSION</b>	<b>182</b>

<b>Chapter 7: Theological Discussion</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>7.1 INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>7.2 SOURCES OF PARTICIPANT THEOLOGIES</b>	<b>187</b>
<b>7.3 SCOPE OF PARTICIPANT THEOLOGIES</b>	<b>191</b>
7.3.1 PENAL SUBSTITUTION	192
7.3.2 MORAL INFLUENCE	198
7.3.3 CHRISTUS VICTOR	198
7.3.4 RECAPITULATION	199
7.3.5 “SAFE IN THE CROSS”	199
<b>7.4 CONSIDERATION OF “THEOLOGIES OF THE LINES”</b>	<b>200</b>
7.4.1 THE PROBLEM – THE GULF BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY	201
7.4.1.1 The Righteousness of God	201
7.4.1.2 God Can’t Look on Sin	205
7.4.1.3 Conclusion	210
7.4.2 A PERSONAL PROBLEM	211
7.4.2.1 Salvation	213
7.4.2.2 Sin	215
7.4.2.3 Conclusion	221
7.4.3 AN EXCLUSIVE SOLUTION	222
7.4.3.1 Conclusion	228
7.4.4 THE COST OF FOLLOWING	229
7.4.4.1 Conclusion	234
<b>7.5 CRITIQUE</b>	<b>234</b>
7.5.1 WELLBEING OF PARTICIPANTS	235
7.5.2 THE PREVALENCE OF PENAL SUBSTITUTIONARY THEORY	237
7.5.3 THE BLURRING OF CHURCH AND CULTURE	239
7.5.4 A CHALLENGE FOR THE FUTURE	244
<b>7.6 CONCLUDING SUMMARY</b>	<b>248</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>255</b>



## **Appendices**

APPENDIX A: Church Advertisement	268
APPENDIX B: University of Otago Ethics Application	269
APPENDIX C: Participant Information Sheet	273
APPENDIX D: Participant Consent Form	276
APPENDIX E: Summary of Focused Coding: Comparison of First Ten Interviews	277
APPENDIX F: Developing Categories	279
APPENDIX G: Conceptual Properties	283
APPENDIX H: God is/God isn't, First Concept	287
APPENDIX I: Developing Concepts	299
APPENDIX J: The Atonement Journey	300
APPENDIX K: Development of Living Across the Lines Schematic	301
APPENDIX L: Development of Patterns in the Thinking Space Schematic	303
APPENDIX M: Development of Codes – Concepts – Categories for the theory: "Living Across the Lines."	305
APPENDIX N: Criteria for Rigor	309

## **List of Tables**

Table 1: Criteria for evaluating grounded theory research	103
Table 2: Participant demographics 1	117
Table 3: Participant demographics 2	118
Table 4: Initial coding example	119
Table 5: Comparison of participant quotes with Grudem's theology	192

## **List of Figures**

Figure 1: A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines	137
Figure 2: Patterns in the Thinking Space	164

## **List of Abbreviations**

CEV	Contemporary English Version
ESV	English Standard Version
KJV	King James Version
NASB	New American Standard Bible
NIV	New International Version
NLT	New Living Translation
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version

# Chapter 1

## Introduction: Setting the Scene

### 1.1 INTRODUCTION

A central concept of the Christian faith is the belief that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ achieved something of special, unprecedented and enduring significance for humanity. The death and resurrection of Christ, as portrayed in the New Testament gospel accounts, is the climax of the biblical narrative of God's relationship with the people of his creation. Christ's death can be understood to be for the whole world (2 Cor 5:15), however in the contemporary evangelical church it is commonly understood to be for the sake of those who come to put their trust and faith in him. The primary sources for our understanding of what was achieved by Christ through his death are the gospel records of his life, ministry and death, together with the developing theological explanations found in the subsequent books of the New Testament. Today, in addition to these foundational accounts, explanations of the significance of Christ's death abound in church creeds and liturgies, in the words of ancient hymns and modern songs, in theological texts and popular Christian books, and through spoken words in a vast array of contexts where Christian people gather to share their faith.

The Incarnation is a central doctrine of the Christian faith, dealing with ideas of the divinity of Christ, the approach of God to humanity through the life and suffering of the Son and the response of humanity to God through the Son. This doctrine is indispensable to Christian belief, but in contrast, the various atonement theories that attempt to explain what is accomplished through the death and resurrection of Christ are not indispensable, rather, they are "...quite personal ideas that become attached to the central insight – the Incarnation."<sup>1</sup>

Notwithstanding this recognition of atonement theories as being of somewhat secondary significance theologically, it is also true that, as Stephen Finlan suggests, they are

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Finlan, *Problems with Atonement : The Origins of, and Controversy About, the Atonement Doctrine* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005), 4. Finlan contends that although some aspect of the Incarnation precedes all major ideas of the atonement, the Incarnation does not supply the content of the reasoning involved in each theory.

significant personally, and ideas about Jesus' death hold significant emotional content for believers. This central belief of Christian faith, that, "Christ died for us," has a wide range of potential implications for the life experience of the individual Christian. Numerous Biblical texts affirm positive outcomes for individuals who put their faith and trust in the one who has died for them. Some examples of these would include: Galatians 5:1 "For freedom Christ has set us free," John 8:32 "And you will know the truth and the truth will set you free," Romans 8:2 "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death," John 14:6 "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the father except through me," and John 10:10 "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly." Jesus began his ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61, saying in Luke 4:18-19, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."<sup>2</sup> These verses, and many others of similar intent, might easily lead the Christian believer to the conclusion that there will be positive outcomes such as emotional freedom, greater joy and peace, an 'abundance' of life. On the other hand, the belief, as it is often stated, that the Son of God has died in the place of the sinful believer, could conversely result in feelings of guilt, self-condemnation and unworthiness.

In discussing the potential psychological impact of views of the atonement, psychologist Paul Pruyser has written, "Christianity asserts the incarnation and the atonement of Jesus Christ as a crucial solution to the continued bleakness of man's situation in the universe. And now we must look at some of the psychological implications of this solution, taking the atonement as our point of entry."<sup>3</sup> In a similar way, Francis and Astley write, "... we note that Christians honor, value and 'worship' (ascribe worth to) Christ and find 'healing,' 'wholeness' and 'salvation' in him. Thus deep questions about what human beings value underlie all 'readings of Jesus.'"<sup>4</sup> One implication of these ideas is that we might expect that the beliefs a person holds about the death of Jesus

---

<sup>2</sup> In quoting these verses we are not in any way attempting to grasp or state a full contextual meaning of each text – rather, they are presented in the straight-forward and literal way that they might be read and understood by the everyday Christian.

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Curtis Abbott, "The Blood of Recognition–Atonement and Transference in Psychoanalytically Based Pastoral Psychotherapy," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 10, no. 4 (2008): 281.

<sup>4</sup> Lesley J. Francis and Jeff Astley, "The Quest for the Psychological Jesus: Influences of Personality on Images of Jesus," *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 16, no. 3 (1997): 248.

will have some impact on their psychological wellbeing. As a simple example, if a Christian's belief is that Christ was a sacrifice offered to God in order to avert God's wrath from falling on that person, then this belief will likely have consequences of some sort in the person's experience of God, perceived relationship with God, and possibly also relationships with others. If on the other hand, the individual understands Christ's death primarily as a cosmic and spiritual triumph in the battle between good and evil, then in a similar way these beliefs will find manifestation in the person's experience of God and relationship with Him and others. As Joel Green and Mark Baker suggest, "...the metaphors concerning the character of God that are accorded privilege in atonement theology lead easily and naturally to the incarnation of those characteristics in human relationship – that is, among those whose vocation is to reflect the divine image."<sup>5</sup>

In recent years there has been substantial research into the impact of religious belief on wellbeing, which we will consider in more detail shortly. As this research has tended to produce ambiguous results, Ana Wong-McDonald and Richard Gorsuch suggest that the ambiguity may be due in part to the effect of mediating variables such as theological beliefs. They contend, "Theologically, the what of Christianity centres on the Who, the person of Jesus Christ...It is the knowledge of God (i.e., knowing Him) which shapes the believers' relationship with God which will in turn affect their behavior and well-being."<sup>6</sup> If this is in fact the case, it is surprising that there is a remarkable paucity of literature considering the impact of belief about the atonement on the wellbeing of believers. Curtis Abbott comments on this lack of attention to the atonement even within important works on pastoral psychotherapy, claiming that within Christology there has been a de-emphasis or even denial of, "...the classical centrality of the Atonement and its unique psychological focus on a personal internalization of healing, forgiveness, transformation and salvation."<sup>7</sup> In a rare contribution to the literature on this subject, Abbott claims that both the atonement and psychotherapy are concerned with the process of change and salvation and that the nature of each individual's pain

---

<sup>5</sup> Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross : Atonement in New Testament e<sup>3</sup> Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 115.

<sup>6</sup> Ana Wong-McDonald and Richard L. Gorsuch, "A Multivariate Theory of God Concept, Religious Motivation, Locus of Control, Coping, and Spiritual Well-Being," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32, no. 4 (2004): 318.

<sup>7</sup> Abbott, "The Blood of Recognition–Atonement and Transference in Psychoanalytically Based Pastoral Psychotherapy," 281.

and injury affects the approach to the atonement that one finds most meaningful and transformational. He writes, “It could be that each Atonement theory addresses certain diagnostic expressions of psychological and, for that matter, social distress and disorder. It may be that the nature of one’s pain and injury affects the approach to the Atonement one finds most meaningful and transformational.”<sup>8</sup> The upshot of this limited research seems to be the suggestion, from both theologians and psychologists, that the specific beliefs held about the atonement will have an affect on the wellbeing of the believer who holds those beliefs. We will turn soon to outline some psychological theories that might provide a framework for considering this relationship between beliefs and wellbeing, and following that discussion I will frame the question to be addressed by this thesis more fully.

## **1.2 PERSONAL STATEMENT**

Before looking at the psychological literature related to beliefs and wellbeing, I must first take a moment to state my personal positioning in approaching this research. As a trained and qualified counsellor, I was working in a church setting as a pastoral counsellor when I commenced this research.<sup>9</sup> In that position, I had the privilege of being involved in people’s lives, particularly at the times of transition, distress, loss and pain that are common to human experience. Because of the church setting, the conversations at those times often included dimensions of the individuals’ beliefs and theological perspectives as well as their accounts of their current challenges, battles and experiences. Quite often there appeared, at face value, to be a dissonance between expressed beliefs and actual experience. For example, faith in Christ was stated as providing assurance and trust, and yet the individual continued to struggle with anxiety about their situation. Often, this disconnection appeared pronounced around the person’s expression of what Christ has done for them. A further personal area of concern is that in my experience, many Christians’ understandings of the atonement are limited to some form of the penal substitutionary model, to the exclusion of other potential appropriations of the meaning of Christ’s death. This is probably because of

---

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, 304.

<sup>9</sup> The role was a pastoral position in a mainstream Protestant church, where most members would see themselves as evangelical. I worked in this part-time position for five years, the last two years being the first two years of this doctoral research. The final year of research was completed after finishing in the pastoral role.

the predominant presentation of some form of penal substitution within much of the contemporary evangelical western church, including in words of songs, liturgy and commonly, the preached word. Clinical psychologist Paul Pruyser reflects on the impact of this plethora of influences and provides insight into the central place of penal substitutionary ideas, even within a framework of a range of other atonement motifs, when he writes,

Is the wine a symbol of spilled blood, messy suffering, and brutal aggression or of new life, gentle nurturance, and rich vitality, or is it perhaps the seal of a promising new pact or covenant. The various doctrinal answers to such questions correlate far less with one's logical acumen or grasp of truth than with the whole cluster of interacting psychological, sociological, economic, theological, denominational, and ideological factors which determine one's concrete religious identity. The power of this correlation resides in the fact that each believer is immersed, as it were, in a vast symbol system around a given atonement motif.<sup>10</sup>

To focus exclusively on the penal substitution model at the expense of other understandings is to miss the rich range of biblical metaphors regarding the death of Christ, and the penal substitutionary model has implications that may at times be difficult for people struggling in challenging pastoral situations. Consequently, my concern in this research is with the atonement beliefs of evangelical Christians. Though this limits the research to a degree, it is the impact of evangelical beliefs about the atonement that are of particular interest to me, as personal experience has suggested that there are some elements of these beliefs that might be considered less than healthy for psychological wellbeing. In order to proceed further, I must first outline what is meant by the term "evangelical."

### 1.3 EVANGELICALISM

Evangelicalism can be simply defined as, "The movement in modern Christianity, transcending denominational and confessional boundaries, that emphasizes conformity to the basic tenets of the faith and missionary outreach of compassion and urgency."<sup>11</sup> Such a definition is a good place to start, though clearly we will need to establish what "the basic tenets of the faith" might be. In another approach at definition, Timothy

---

<sup>10</sup> Paul W. Pruyser, *A Dynamic Psychology of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 325.

<sup>11</sup> R.V. Pierard, "Evangelicalism," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 379.

Larsen instead describes the characteristics of an evangelical: someone who is an orthodox Protestant who stands in the tradition of global Christian networks arising from the eighteenth-century revival movements; who upholds the Bible as the divinely inspired authority on matters of faith and practice; who stresses the atoning work of Christ on the cross, and the work of the Holy Spirit in bringing a person to conversion, and encouraging the believer to a life of fellowship with God and service to God and others.<sup>12</sup> Larsen ascribes the roots of evangelicalism to the Great Awakening of the eighteenth century, and this claim is generally validated, though some are quick to point out that “*theologically* evangelical faith goes right back to the beginning of the church itself... it was what the Christians at the time of the Bible thought, what the early church taught, and what the reformers of the sixteenth-century also believed.”<sup>13</sup>

The Great Awakening was a time of renewed spiritual fervor on both sides of the Atlantic, starting in the early decades of the eighteenth century and then with a second resurgence around the start of the nineteenth century. Compelling preachers such as John Wesley, George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards emphasized the need for personal confession of sin, repentance, personal salvation and a renewed commitment to moral living.<sup>14</sup> As well as prompting personal response to the Gospel, the Awakenings heralded an era of great social concern as Christians responded to their convictions by seeking to usher in the Kingdom on earth through improved social conditions, as witnessed by the efforts of people such as Lord Shaftsbury, William Wilberforce, George Williams, founder of the YMCA, Catherine and William Booth, founders of the Salvation Army and Thomas Barnardo with his concern for children. Behind these great social developments were the great preachers; men like Spurgeon in England and Moody in America who brought the Christian faith to the people and compelled

---

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Larsen, “Defining and Locating Evangelicalism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Catherwood, *The Evangelicals : What They Believe, Where They Are, and Their Politics* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010), 93. (Emphasis in original). See also Pierard, who also suggests that although evangelicalism is sometimes seen as a modern phenomenon, “the evangelical spirit has manifested itself throughout church history. The commitment, discipline, and missionary zeal that distinguish evangelicalism were features of the apostolic church, the fathers, early monasticism, the medieval reform movements...” Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” 380.

<sup>14</sup> Balmer discusses the rise of evangelicalism in the American context and suggests that the success of Charles Finney’s approach during the second Awakening was in part because Finney preached that salvation was available to all and only required the individuals assent to that salvation. Hence, “Among a people who had only recently taken their *political* destiny into their own hands, Finney assured them that they controlled their *religious* destiny as well.” Randall Herbert Balmer, *The Making of Evangelicalism : From Revivalism to Politics, and Beyond* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010), 21.



personal response to the message of the Gospel. This evangelical revival, however, had begun to fade by the end of the nineteenth century and the advent of the First World War saw the evangelical optimism almost expire.<sup>15</sup> The years between the great wars were marked by the emergence of a narrow fundamentalism that sought to withdraw from the world rather than engage in social action, but following the Second World War a further resurgence of evangelicalism occurred, spear-headed by Billy Graham and his organization, who called for the World Congress on Evangelism (Berlin, 1966) and the International Congress on World Evangelization (Lausanne, 1974).

Historian David Bebbington has described the characteristics of evangelicalism, in what has come to be known as the “Bebbington Quadrilateral.” He lists the four marks of evangelicalism as Biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism and activism.<sup>16</sup> In a similar way, John Stackhouse suggests that evangelical theology should be Christocentric and Christological, Bible-centred, conversion-oriented, mission-focused and transdenominational.<sup>17</sup> This transdenominational nature of evangelicalism is particularly important, and has two key results. First, the emergence of non-denominational “parachurch” organisations. One of the first such organisations was the Evangelical Alliance, formed in London in 1846 to “unite Christians in promoting religious liberty, missions, and other common interests.”<sup>18</sup> The latter part of the twentieth century saw a proliferation of evangelical organisations, including, but certainly not limited to: The National Association of Evangelicals, International Fellowship of Evangelical Students (IFES), Navigators and Youth With A Mission.<sup>19</sup> Second, for many who consider themselves to be evangelical, this identification is in many cases stronger than identification with a particular denomination. Christopher Catherwood comments that

---

<sup>15</sup> Pierard contends that factors that contributed to the decline of evangelicalism at the close of the nineteenth century included, “A decorous worldliness characterized by a stress on material prosperity, loyalty to the nation-state, and a rugged individualism inspired by social Darwinism virtually severed the taproot of social concern. Orthodox Christians seems unable to cope with the flood of new ideas – German higher criticism, Freudian psychology, Marxist socialism, Nietzschean nihilism, and the naturalism of the new science – all of which undermined confidence in the infallibility of the Bible and existence of the supernatural. The bloodbath of World War 1 shattered the optimistic, postmillennial vision of ushering in the kingdom of God...” Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” 381.

<sup>16</sup> See D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain : A History from the 1750s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2-17.

<sup>17</sup> John G. Stackhouse, “Evangelical Theology Should Be Evangelical,” in *Evangelical Futures : A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse (Nottingham: Apollos, 2001), 43-58.

<sup>18</sup> Pierard, “Evangelicalism,” 381.

<sup>19</sup> A “Wikipedia” entry “Evangelical Parachurch Organizations” list 153 different links to such organisations. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Evangelical\\_parachurch\\_organisations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Evangelical_parachurch_organisations) (Accessed 10 May 2017).

often evangelicals have more in common with evangelicals from other denominations than they may have with other members of their own denomination, and that: “This has led to evangelicals getting in trouble from time to time with their denominations, and one could say with good cause, because at the deepest doctrinal level, the accusation that being evangelical is a higher loyalty than being part of a denomination is true.”<sup>20</sup>

Evangelical beliefs are focused around the characteristics suggested by Bebbington and Stackhouse, and one important expression of beliefs is the Basis of Faith of the Evangelical Alliance<sup>21</sup> which, in summary of its eleven points: affirms belief in one true God; in the sovereignty of God in creating, redeeming and judging the world; in the authority of the Bible as the written word of God; in the dignity of all people made in the image of God, yet corrupted by sin and subject to the wrath of God; in the incarnation of God’s son, Jesus Christ; in the atoning sacrifice of Christ; in the bodily resurrection; in the justification of sinners solely by the grace of God and through faith in Christ; in the ministry of the Holy Spirit to lead people to repentance; in the church as the body of Christ; and in the personal and visible return of Christ.<sup>22</sup> The statement that is most central to this research is statement 6, which claims belief in: “The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross: dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God.”

## 1.4 THE INTERFACE OF PSYCHOLOGY AND THEOLOGY

Over the course of the last century, the developing modern discipline of psychology has come to say much about the human condition, including matters of the soul and issues of faith, which have traditionally been held within the realm of theology. These developing psychological theories and theology have not always been easy partners, perhaps due to the early influence of the work of Sigmund Freud, who rejected religion as a neurosis, and in response to the famous text from Genesis, “God created man in his own image”

---

<sup>20</sup> Catherwood, *The Evangelicals*, 29.

<sup>21</sup> For discussion of the debate that occurred within the Evangelical Alliance around the subject of the atonement, the subsequent London Symposium on the Theology of the Atonement, and the historical development of the wording of the Alliance’s “Basis of Faith,” see David Hilborn, “Atonement, Evangelicalism and the Evangelical Alliance: The Present Debate in Context,” in *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 15-28.

<sup>22</sup> This is a summary of the full Basis of Faith, available at: <http://www.eauk.org/connect/about-us/basis-of-faith.cfm> (Accessed 10 May 2017).

proposed instead that “Man created God in his.”<sup>23</sup> More recently however, a number of psychotherapies have moved to some extent towards a wider acceptance of religious thought and the spiritual dimension of life.<sup>24</sup> In addition, in recent years the discipline of the integration of psychology and theology has developed to address the question of how best to envisage the relationship between the best that these disciplines have to offer.<sup>25</sup> Of particular interest to the present study is the significant body of published research that examines the varied aspects of the relationship between ideas of God, religious affiliation or spirituality on the one hand, and the formation of identity, well-being and mental health on the other. It needs to be noted at this stage that this general area of research is marked by a great deal of complexity, as each of these dimensions requires careful definition and is clearly open to a variety of interpretations. For example, religious affiliation is a different dimension to spirituality, and each will have differing impacts on wellbeing. Even within the term ‘religious affiliation’ there is a plethora of contributing factors that, each in their own right, will have impact on wellbeing. In addition, there are numerous other factors that significantly impact on a person’s religious affiliation, for example family origins, including early experiences of parents, early childhood church experiences, peer influences through the teenage years and so forth. Furthermore, religious affiliation may be expressed through religious practices or may be primarily ideological, and these differences appear to have differing outcomes in the well-being literature.<sup>26</sup> Thus, we note that this is a complex, multi-faceted area of research.

Notwithstanding these complexities, the emerging research has begun to shed some light on the relationships between psychological and religious factors. Bergin’s landmark and oft-quoted 1983 meta-analysis of studies examining mental health and religiosity revealed a positive relationship between the two factors in 47% of studies, a negative

---

<sup>23</sup> For a brief discussion of Freud’s work and influence, see Ana-Maria Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 13-39.

<sup>24</sup> See for example the discussion of modern psychotherapies in Stanton L. Jones and Richard E. Butman, *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991). For another general discussion of the various psychotherapies see Raymond J. Corsini and Danny Wedding, *Current Psychotherapies* (Itasca, Ill.: F.E. Peacock Publishers, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> As is evidenced by journals such as *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* and *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health*.

<sup>26</sup> Joseph Tloczynski, Christa Knoll and Andrew Fitch, “The Relationship among Spirituality, Religious Ideology, and Personality,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 25, no. 2 (1997): 212. Brokaw and Edwards similarly conclude, “Thus the relationship between religion and psychological functioning is complex, multi-dimensional and intriguing.” Beth Brokaw and Keith J. Edwards, “The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 22, no. 4 (1994): 353.

relationship in 23% and no relationship in 30% of studies.<sup>27</sup> In one quantitative study that distinguished between spirituality and religiosity, high levels of spirituality correlated with healthy personality traits, whilst religious ideology did not have a significant relationship with such traits.<sup>28</sup> One contemporary researcher goes so far as to write, “There is now a substantial empirical literature examining the linkages between religion/spirituality (RS) and mental health...”<sup>29</sup> Of particular interest to the present study is research into the image of God and psychological functioning, where positive, loving God images are positively linked with positive self-esteem,<sup>30</sup> empathic orientation towards others,<sup>31</sup> and emotional stability.<sup>32</sup> There is also a body of research exploring the reverse effect, where, “persons who are more disturbed in their psychological functioning may view God as more distant, punitive, and wrathful.”<sup>33</sup> Such research is centered on establishing understandings of participants’ images of God, with the hypothesis being that the way God is seen or experienced will impact on the believer’s experience of life. This research is interesting and pertinent to the present study because it seems logical to expect that understanding of the nature and role of Christ’s death would in turn influence the image of God formed for the believer. In other words, we might expect that how people understand God and the impact that has on the image they form of God, would be informed, at least in part, by their theological conception of the way God has chosen to work through the atonement.

However, in the literature concerning God image and human experience, there is remarkably little comment to be found on the role that understanding of the atonement has to play, either in the formation of God image or on subsequent experience of life.

---

<sup>27</sup> Allen E. Bergin, “Religiosity and Mental Health: A Critical Reevaluation and Meta-Analysis,” *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 14, no. 2 (1983): 170-84. One study claims, “The study of spirituality and health is a true frontier for psychology and one with high public interest.” William R. Miller and Carl E. Thoresen, “Spirituality, Religion, and Health. An Emerging Research Field,” *The American psychologist* 58, no. 1 (2003): 24.

<sup>28</sup> See Tloczynski, “The Relationship among Spirituality, Religious Ideology, and Personality,” 211-12.

<sup>29</sup> Todd W. Hall, “Christian Spirituality and Mental Health: A Relational Spirituality Paradigm for Empirical Research,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 1 (2004): 66.

<sup>30</sup> See P Benson and B Spilka, “God Image as a Function of Self-Esteem and Locus of Control,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 12 (1973).

<sup>31</sup> K. Edwards, “Religious Experience as a Function of Self-Concept and Interpersonal Behaviour,” (LaMirada, CA: Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology, Biola College, 1977).

<sup>32</sup> K. Edwards et al., “Religious Experience as a Function of Self-Concept and Interpersonal Behaviour,” (LaMirada, CA: Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola College, 1979).

<sup>33</sup> Brokaw and Edwards, “The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations,” 354. This research implies that it is psychopathology that leads to individuals having these negative views of God – it is interesting to speculate whether there is a reverse causative effect whereby it is the negative views or experiences of God that lead to the psychopathology.

Pruyser touches on the subject when he writes, “One is tempted to ask about the relevance of the dissemination of certain atonement doctrines for mental health...”<sup>34</sup> Green’s and Baker’s proposition that the view of the atonement held by a believer may impact on understanding of the character of God, which in turn may be outworked in that believer’s own life and relationships,<sup>35</sup> remains a proposition, with no research to either support the claim or provide any explanation of how this might actually work. On the other hand, Francis’s and Astley’s research examines the relationship between an individual’s image of Jesus and their own self-image, and finds a positive correlation,<sup>36</sup> but is not explicit in any way regarding how views of the atonement might affect the image of Jesus held by participants in the study.

## 1.5 PSYCHOLOGICAL THEORIES

Within Psychology, there are three theories that can contribute to an understanding of the complex relationship between matters of faith and issues of wellbeing. We will first consider Object Relations Theory and Attachment Theory, which arose in the early years of the development of psychotherapy. Then we will turn to consider a recent amalgamation of these two theories known as implicit relational representations theory.

### 1.5.1 OBJECT RELATIONS THEORY

Object relations theory is a psychoanalytic theory that emerged through the 1940’s and onwards in the work of W.R.D. Fairbairn,<sup>37</sup> Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott,<sup>38</sup> Margaret Mahler and Harry Guntrip amongst others. It differs from classical Freudian psychoanalytic thought in that it is relationally-focused rather than drives-focused, proposing that our present day relationships and ways of being are fundamentally affected by the formative relationships of infant with parents, and that our adult

---

<sup>34</sup> Paul W. Pruyser, “Anxiety, Guilt and Shame in the Atonement,” in *Religion in Psychodynamic Perspective: The Contributions of Paul W. Pruyser*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Bernard Spilka (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 27.

<sup>35</sup> Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 115.

<sup>36</sup> Francis and Astley, “The Quest for the Psychological Jesus,” 254-56.

<sup>37</sup> W. Ronald D. Fairbairn, *An Object Relations Theory of the Personality* (New York: Basic Books, 1954).

<sup>38</sup> D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York: Basic Books, 1971).

relationships are modeled on the blueprint of these early experiences.<sup>39</sup> Michael St Clair explains this, saying, “In other words, current relationships tend to be a new edition of some previous important relationship, a kind of repetition of a relationship from the past”<sup>40</sup> and he goes further in suggesting that past interpersonal relationships also have a role in shaping an individual’s relationship to the sacred.<sup>41</sup> Though the psychoanalytic origins of object relations theory were strongly anti-religious, the relational dimension of the theory means that it lends itself easily to discussion of matters of faith, as faith in its simplest form is experienced as a relationship with God. Accordingly, a number of theorists have taken a pro-religious stance in accepting that people have an ‘object god’ that is involved in the constellation of relationships they experience. Significant theorists in this regard include John McDargh, whose doctoral research published in 1983 asserted that, “It is a major thesis of this book that one of the most significant object representations with which an individual is in life-long relationship is the object representation of God.”<sup>42</sup> St. Clair points out also that the focus of object relations theory on relationship must also include the relationship to the sacred and argues that object relations theory can provide genuine insight into religion, particularly into “the study of the formulation of our images of God.”<sup>43</sup> St. Clair considers the parallels between the ways people relate interpersonally and the ways they relate to God.<sup>44</sup> The ‘object god’ that forms as a psychic representation in all individuals is formed primarily through the earliest of childhood experiences, including the experience of the personalities of parents, highlights and difficulties in relationships with parents and siblings, the general intellectual, religious, and social makeup of the household<sup>45</sup> together with a range of other influences over the first three years, including “cues, gestures, instructions, reprimands and routines.”<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup> Philip J. Halstead, “Forgiveness Matters: A Psychometric and Qualitative Study of the Development of a Forgiveness Course for New Zealand Churchgoing Adults Exploring Their Parental Relationships” (Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Auckland, 2009), 182.

<sup>40</sup> Michael St. Clair, *Human Relationships and the Experience of God: Object Relations and Religion* (New York: Paulist Press, 1994), 8.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>42</sup> McDargh’s doctoral thesis was later published as: John McDargh, *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion: On Faith and the Imaging of God* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983), 18.

<sup>43</sup> St. Clair, *Human Relationships and the Experience of God*, 11.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-49.

<sup>45</sup> For discussion of these factors see the seminal work of: Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God*, 35. Nelson picks up these themes and adds the factor of the economic stability of the household. C. Ellis Nelson, “Formation of a God Representation,” *Religious Education* 91, no. 1 (1996): 35.

<sup>46</sup> See Philip Leroy Culbertson, *Caring for God’s People: Counseling and Christian Wholeness* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000), 102. For a study comparing parental images with the formation

It seems then that when enough of these factors combine in a “good enough”<sup>47</sup> fashion in the early years of a child’s development, the seeds will be sown for high levels of object relations development, positive internal representations and positive internalized God images. For those individuals who go on as adults to be involved in expressions of religious or spiritual life, it is likely that these positive early experiences will result in experience of God as being more loving and stable, less wrathful and less defensive.<sup>48</sup> Such high levels of object relations development are also linked with high levels of spiritual maturity.<sup>49</sup> On the other hand, individuals whose earliest experiences lead to low levels of object relations development will also tend to have poor internal self representations, low levels of spiritual maturity, negative God images where he is experienced as wrathful or irrelevant, and psychopathology involving adverse outcomes. Factors that significantly contribute to early object relations development include both relational learning and cognitive teaching,<sup>50</sup> where the cognitive input becomes steadily more significant as the individual progresses through the developmental stages. Low object relations development, with its attendant risk of psychopathology, has been specifically linked to beliefs in a punitive God, extrinsic religiousness (as opposed to intrinsic religiousness) and hyper-rigid religiousness.<sup>51</sup> Todd Hall and Beth Brokaw contend, “If a person maintains an object representation of God and experiences Him as wrathful and irrelevant, it seems reasonable to assume that he or she will have more difficulty relating to God in a maturely dependent manner than a person who experiences God as loving, benevolent, and righteous.”<sup>52</sup> In light of these research findings, it is again surprising that there appears to have been little exploration of the ways that understanding of the meanings of Christ’s suffering and death might impact

---

of the object god, see also Ian T. Birky, “Parental Trait Influence on God as an Object Representation,” *Journal of Psychology* 122, no. 2 (1988): 133-37.

<sup>47</sup> This phrase was introduced by object relations theorist Donald Winnicott, initially to describe “good enough” mothering. See Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*.

<sup>48</sup> See Todd W. Hall, “Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part I: The Emergence of Two Relational Traditions,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35, no. 1 (2007): 17.

<sup>49</sup> Hall and Brokaw suggest that, “Just as the underlying core of spiritual maturity is relational, so also are the constructs of God image or representation and level of object relations development in that they both deal with an individual’s internal representational world. People’s images of God involve how they represent and experience God and comprise one aspect of their overall relationship with Him.” Todd Hall and Beth Brokaw, “The Relationship of Spiritual Maturity to Level of Object Relations Development and God Image,” *Pastoral Psychology* 43, no. 6 (1995): 373-74.

<sup>50</sup> “An individual’s growing image of God appears to be based not only on cognitive teaching about God but also on relational learning.” Brokaw and Edwards, “The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations,” 367.

<sup>51</sup> See Hall, “Christian Spirituality and Mental Health,” 66.

<sup>52</sup> Hall and Brokaw, “The Relationship of Spiritual Maturity to Level of Object Relations Development and God Image,” 379. They also suggest here that image of God is also directly related to spiritual maturity.

on people's developing God images. Whilst it appears true that the earliest God images are formed in the first three years, when perhaps there would be very little exposure to direct teaching about the nature of Christ's death, it is probable that a child who is part of a religious family will absorb at least a little of the family's understanding of this subject. In addition, it also appears true that objects are continually revised throughout the lifespan and into adulthood, and one of the tasks of adulthood is to work to revise the early god-representation in a way that keeps in touch with adult learning but also with the adult experience of God and with the individual's developing self-representation.<sup>53</sup> In the midst of this complexity, Hall poses the critical question, "In the context of Christian spirituality and mental health, the task is to explain how and why Christian spirituality becomes pathologically engaged for some individuals, leading to adverse mental health outcomes."<sup>54</sup>

## 1.5.2 ATTACHMENT THEORY

At the same time as object relations theory was developing, another theoretical tradition also emerged from the same psychoanalytic soil. Attachment theory developed originally in the work of John Bowlby, emerging parallel to object relations theory but remaining quite distinct from it.<sup>55</sup> Bowlby's work was a further rejection of Freudian drives-based theory, in favour of a relational-focused framework for understanding behavior. According to Bowlby, human infants are motivated to become and remain attached to primary caregivers so that they maintain proximity during times of danger, and develop the security to explore during the absence of danger. By becoming attached in this way, infants have increased security from predators, a central feature of the natural selection criterion of evolution.<sup>56</sup> Attachment bonds are formed between infants and their caregivers as the infant seeks security and comfort in these relationships. Mary Ainsworth's research into the 'Strange Situation' became foundational in the development of attachment theory as she described the varying responses of infants in a

---

<sup>53</sup> St. Clair addresses this subject at length in the third chapter of his book. St. Clair, *Human Relationships and the Experience of God*, 30-51. This is also a basic premise of Rizzuto's work: Rizzuto, *The Birth of the Living God*.

<sup>54</sup> Hall, "Christian Spirituality and Mental Health," 67.

<sup>55</sup> For a discussion of the personalities involved in the early days of the development of object relations and attachment theories, and in particular Bowlby's departure from the mainstream psychoanalytic community, see Hall, "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part I," 14.

<sup>56</sup> Lee Kirkpatrick, "An Attachment-Theory Approach Psychology of Religion," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 1 (1992): 4.



clinical experiment where they were exposed over short periods to the presence or absence of a mother or a stranger.<sup>57</sup> Ainsworth described three styles of attachment: Firstly, secure attachment, in which the infant is able to explore their environment while their caregiver is present and though some distress results when the caregiver leaves, the infant is quickly comforted on their return. Insecure attachment is characterized in two ways: Avoidantly attached children tend to appear content even when the caregiver leaves the room, apparently experiencing little distress at separation, while anxious/ambivalently attached children become distressed but then appear to refuse to be comforted on the caregiver's return.<sup>58</sup> Children observed to be avoidant tend to be raised in homes where the caregiver is cold and distant and rarely offers physical or emotional contact, whereas anxious/ambivalently attached children tend to have caregivers who are inconsistent in their responses to the child's needs, with this unpredictability leading to anxiety in the child as to whether his or her needs will be met.<sup>59</sup> Later, a fourth attachment style, disorganised attachment has been described,<sup>60</sup> in which the child is characterized by an inability to trust, an apparent fear of the caregiver, a loss of attention and a collapse of attachment behaviours.<sup>61</sup> Research indicates that early attachment styles tend to become internalized as internal working models, which function as templates that individuals then build future adult relationships on. Childhood difficulties resulting in insecure attachments can subsequently form the basis of poor adult relationships and other psychopathology as consequences of the internal working models.<sup>62</sup>

Attachment theory has also been explored with respect to a number of dimensions of religious and spiritual life. It has been proposed that attachment styles impact on

---

<sup>57</sup> See M.D.S. Ainsworth and S.M. Bell, "Attachment Exploration, and Separation: Illustrated by the Behavior of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation," *Child Development* 41 (1970).

<sup>58</sup> See Robert Karen, *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 143-61.

<sup>59</sup> Glendon Moriarty, Louis Hoffman, and Christopher Grimes, "Understanding the God Image through Attachment Theory: Theory, Research, and Practice," *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 9, no. 2 (2006): 46.

<sup>60</sup> M. Main and J. Solomon, "Procedures for Identifying Infants as Disorganised/Disoriented During the Ainsworth Strange Situation," in *Attachment in the Preschool Years: Theory, Research, and Intervention*, ed. Mark T. Greenberg, Dante Cicchetti, and E. Mark Cummings (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 193-246.

<sup>61</sup> David Howe, *Attachment across the Lifecourse: A Brief Introduction* (Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 153.

<sup>62</sup> Moriarty, Hoffman, and Grimes, "Understanding the God Image through Attachment Theory: Theory, Research, and Practice," 45.

individual's God images, God concepts, degree of religiosity and religious experiences.<sup>63</sup> In particular, it is proposed that relationship with God operates as some type of attachment relationship, most similar to the parent-child relationship.<sup>64</sup> This is of course reinforced by the language of Christianity, which uses the image of God as 'father' or 'mother' and also refers to believers as children. In attachment terms, in relationship with God the father, believers need, "both a secure base from which to explore their worlds (internal and external), and a haven of safety to comfort and soothe in times of distress or trauma."<sup>65</sup> While there has been little research on the subject of God attachment and psychological well-being, Kirkpatrick and Shaver found that individuals who evidenced secure attachment to God reported lower levels of depression, anxiety and physical illness and greater levels of life satisfaction.<sup>66</sup> However, attachment to God is a multifaceted area of research reflecting the complexity of relationships involved. A question of particular significance is whether the nature of attachment to God follows the individual's childhood attachment pattern or whether it might in some ways react against that pattern. It is accepted that a securely attached individual is most likely to experience secure attachment to God, reflecting what has become referred to as the correspondence hypothesis, but there is less clarity over the situation for an insecurely attached individual. In this situation, with individuals who did not experience secure attachment with their caregivers, the compensation hypothesis<sup>67</sup> is suggested, whereby religious beliefs or experiences substitute or compensate for the lack of secure attachment with caregivers.<sup>68</sup> As this is clearly a complex arena, it is also likely that these models are overly simplistic and that the reality is more dynamic and changing.<sup>69</sup> As one response to this tension, Maureen Miner discusses two further possibilities for compensatory attachment; first, that God operates as a "fully adequate surrogate

---

<sup>63</sup> For a discussion of the sources of these various avenues of research, see: *ibid.*, 47.

<sup>64</sup> Hall, "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part I," 22.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>66</sup> See Lee A. Kirkpatrick and Phillip R. Shaver, "Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 3 (1990): 315-34.

<sup>67</sup> Both the correspondence and compensation hypotheses were first articulated by Kirkpatrick. See Lee Kirkpatrick, "An Attachment-Theory Approach to the Psychology of Religion," in *The Psychology of Religion: Theoretical Approaches*, ed. B. Spilka and D.N. McIntosh (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997). and Kirkpatrick and Shaver, "Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion," 315-34. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>68</sup> Current research on this subject seems to be producing ambiguous results – for a discussion, see: Hall, "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part I," 20-22.

<sup>69</sup> Moriarty et al. discuss "complex relationship models" as one way of resolving the tension between the two disparate models. Moriarty, Hoffman, and Grimes, "Understanding the God Image through Attachment Theory: Theory, Research, and Practice," 47-49.

attachment figure,”<sup>70</sup> where the strength of attachment serves to transform damaged internal working models of self and others, and second, the possibility that adults can hold both positive and negative attachment relationship experiences with “highly elaborated and *differentiated* working models that incorporate positive and negative attachment experiences in a complex network.”<sup>71</sup>

### 1.5.3 IMPLICIT RELATIONAL REPRESENTATIONS THEORY

Todd Hall, in acknowledging that the originally disparate traditions of psychoanalytic object relations and attachment theories have in recent years begun to merge in a number of significant ways, has gone further to propose a synthesis that draws on relational aspects of object relations theory, attachment theory, multiple code theory and the findings of neurobiology. The five central organizing principles of Hall’s “implicit relational representation theory” are:

- 1) People are fundamentally motivated by, and develop in the context of emotionally significant relationships.
- 2) There are multiple codes of emotional information processing, which provide a theoretical framework for understanding the way in which close relationships are processed and internalized, thereby shaping the patterns of our relationships with God, self and others. Bucci’s (1997) Multiple Code Theory provides a broad conceptual framework suggesting there are three general levels, or ‘codes,’ of emotional information processing: (a) subsymbolic emotional processing; (b) nonverbal symbolic emotional processing; and (c) verbal, symbolic processing.
- 3) Implicit relational representations are repetitions of relational experiences, sharing a common affective core, that are conceptually encoded in the mind as non-propositional meaning structures. They are the memory basis for implicit relational knowledge; that is, our ‘gut-level’ sense of how significant relationships work.
- 4) Implicit relational representations, formed particularly from experiences in early relationships with caregivers, shape the emotional appraisal of meaning and subsequent patterns of relationship.
- 5) Implicit relational representations and knowledge form the foundation of our knowledge of self and others because they are processed automatically, and are not under the direct control of knowledge in the form of words that is processed in a linear manner.<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>70</sup> Maureen Miner, “The Impact of Child-Parent Attachment, Attachment to God and Religious Orientation on Psychological Adjustment,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37, no. 2 (2009): 116.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Hall, “Christian Spirituality and Mental Health,” 68-73.

A number of proposals that are both interesting and useful to the present study emerge from Hall's work. The first is that Hall distinguishes between two basic forms of knowing, namely explicit and implicit knowledge. Implicit knowledge is based around the ideas of Bucci's subsymbolic emotional processing, found predominantly in the brain's right side, and experienced as "the 'gut-level' knowledge, or meaning, that is carried in our bodies, emotions, and stories."<sup>73</sup> Explicit knowledge on the other hand is the logical, analytical, linear and conscious work, predominantly of the left side of the brain, usually expressed through images and words.<sup>74</sup> Secondly, Hall develops these ideas in light of a further understanding of the significance of narrative or 'storying' as a way of telling and relating to the emotional and spiritually significant dimensions of our lives. Referring to Bruner's work, Hall suggests two different ways of understanding the world: "...paradigmatic and narrative modes of thought – that parallel explicit and implicit relational forms of knowing, respectively."<sup>75</sup> However, this is not a simple division whereby explicit knowledge is expressed somehow in a factual and emotionless sense while narratives contain the implicit, emotional content of knowing. Rather, it is usual to find that narratives contain not only verbal symbolic content (and in some forms of communication, non-verbal symbolic content), but they also contain the sub-symbolic content that is formed in our earliest experiences and has formed our fundamental expectations of how life and relationships will be. For Hall, this implicit relational meaning "is carried in the emotional communication of our 'between-the-lines' stories,"<sup>76</sup> and further, these internalized narratives become the "spiritual stories we live by."<sup>77</sup> In Hall's model, psychospiritual<sup>78</sup> wellbeing is a result of an individual being able to adequately integrate their explicit and implicit knowledge, that is, the factual information they believe, with the internalized internal working models formed in the earliest years. This integration is brought about, at least in part, through the

---

<sup>73</sup> Todd Hall, "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part II: The Spiritual Stories We Live By," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35, no. 1 (2007): 33.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>78</sup> Hall contends, along with Benner that "the internal dimension of persons is not separable into 'spiritual' and 'psychological' components. In other words, the processes (i.e., the emotional appraisal of meaning) that govern one's relationship with God, a typical understanding of 'spirituality,' are the very same ('psychological') processes, outlined in the implicit relational theory above, that govern one's relationship with self and others." Hall, "Christian Spirituality and Mental Health," 75. Referring to: David G. Benner, *Psychotherapy and the Spiritual Quest* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988).

telling of our stories in a safe context, in ways that make implicit relational knowledge explicit: "The very act...of telling their story in words...transforms it."<sup>79</sup>

This model of understanding, which has arisen from the dual streams of object relations and attachment theories, raises interesting questions for the present thesis. Christian believers all have an understanding of some sort of the meaning and purpose of Christ's death. At one level, this will be an explicit, knowledge-based understanding based on teaching that the individual has received and the "vast symbol system" referred to by Pruser. It is, however, also likely that this understanding might have emotional content for the believer, and it is proposed that this emotional content will be linked in some way to the individual's internal working models. In fact, it is possible that the subsymbolic emotional content of the internal working model will have a more fundamental impact on the believer than the explicit teaching on the atonement accepted by the believer. As Hall puts this, "implicit experiences form the *foundation* of the emotional appraisal of meaning in any aspect of spiritual functioning including one's relationship with God, rather than explicit, symbolic, knowledge of God or theology."<sup>80</sup>

If this is the case, at least two implications are clear. The first is that to explore the impact of believers' understanding of atonement on their wellbeing, must necessarily also involve somehow exploring the impact that their implicit relational understandings have on their explicit understandings. To do this requires the ability to 'listen between the lines' of believer's stories to hear the emotional content of what they bring to their understanding of Jesus' death 'for us'. It is quite possible that a believer will have one story or understanding of the atonement that provides an explicit theological account or understanding, but also have another implicit story that is more strongly influenced by their subsymbolic, implicit relational framework, and it is possible that this second story will be the one that holds the greatest power in the believer's life. The second implication is that if implicit experiences are the primary source of attributing meaning to one's relationship with God, then the proposition that specific beliefs about the atonement will have an impact on a believer's wellbeing, may turn out to be an oversimplification that ignores the impact of subsymbolic emotional processing. In this

---

<sup>79</sup> Hall, "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part II," 40.

<sup>80</sup> Hall, "Christian Spirituality and Mental Health," 75.

case, explicit beliefs about the atonement, or any other aspect of theology, might not be a primary source of content related to psychospiritual wellbeing.

## 1.6 THE RESEARCH QUESTION

These different approaches therefore leave us with a question: the question that lies at the heart of this thesis. Do the specific beliefs that an individual holds about the atonement have an impact on the wellbeing of the person in their daily life, or alternatively, are a person's subsymbolic structures more significant in this regard and therefore theological beliefs will have less, or even no, impact on wellbeing? A second question, if the answer to the first question is affirmative, will be to ask how specific beliefs might impact on a person's wellbeing.<sup>81</sup>

As has already been mentioned, there is a remarkable lack of literature that is specifically related to the questions at the heart of this thesis. This absence of literature, together with the reality that we are interested in the lives of people of faith means that this investigation must return to first principles to explore how people integrate that faith in their lives; to ask the questions and to search for the answers we are looking for. A number of quantitative tools have been developed for assessment of peoples' perceptions of God,<sup>82</sup> however, a qualitative, interview-based approach is best suited to the present study, as it is the stories of believers that I hope will provide insights into both their beliefs and their "between the lines stories" carrying the emotional content of their beliefs. The lack of literature lends itself to the use of Grounded Theory, as originally outlined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss.<sup>83</sup> Grounded theory holds

---

<sup>81</sup> Throughout this thesis I use the term "wellbeing" to refer to the broad area of research into positive psychospiritual outcomes such as emotional stability, empathy, healthy personality traits and strong self-identity that result from mature object relations development and secure attachment to God. In Hall's model, wellbeing is similarly related to positive mental health outcomes, including variables such as "self-esteem, depression, and subjective wellbeing, among other things." Hall, "Christian Spirituality and Mental Health," 77.

<sup>82</sup> For example, the GII (God Image Inventory) and GIS (God Image Scale): see Richard T. Lawrence, "Measuring the Image of God: The God Inventory and the God Image Scales," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 25, no. 2 (1997): 214-26. The SAI (Spiritual Assessment Inventory) and RSI (Religious Status Inventory): see Todd W. Hall et al., "An Empirical Exploration of Psychoanalysis and Religion: Spiritual Maturity and Object Relations Development," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 2 (1998): 303-13.

<sup>83</sup> See Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1967). Note however that Glaser and Strauss' approaches have subsequently diverged, forming two somewhat different approaches within grounded theory. For a description of the differences, see Helen Heath and Sarah Cowley, "Developing a Grounded Theory

particular value for dealing with analysis of qualitative data such as is generated through interviews, and in particular focuses on the concurrent collection and analysis of data.<sup>84</sup> Grounded Theory is suitable in research situations where there is little literature or no existing theory, as it aims to generate theory rather than simply describe the situation being studied.

## 1.7 THESIS STRUCTURE

This thesis is composed of seven chapters, beginning with this introductory chapter that has explored the thesis topic by presenting some theological and psychological background. In Chapter 2 we turn to look at theories of the atonement, beginning with an examination of the biblical materials in the Old and New Testaments that have laid the foundations for development of theories of the atonement. We then look at the major theories of atonement that have been expounded throughout the course of church history. In Chapter 3 our focus changes as we turn to explain Grounded Theory as a methodology that is suitable for exploring a subject such as this, where there is little or no existing theory. This chapter begins with a theoretical description of the philosophical underpinnings and methodologies associated with Grounded Theory, and then turns to explain the specific methods that were used in this research. Chapter 4 provides an overview of the results, explaining the theory, “A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines.” In Chapters 5 and 6, these results are explored and explained in much greater detail. Chapter 5 looks at the data from participants that explains the part of the theory “Living between the lines” and Chapter 6 explores “Patterns in the thinking space.” Finally, in Chapter 7, we reflect theologically on the theory, present the conclusions of the research and make some suggestions as a result of these conclusions.

---

Approach: A Comparison of Glaser and Strauss,” *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 41, no. 2 (2004): 141-50. See also D. Walker and F. Myrick, “Grounded Theory: An Exploration of Process and Procedure,” *Qual Health Res* 16, no. 4 (2006): 547-59.

<sup>84</sup> Note that in their seminal work, Glaser and Strauss claim that both quantitative and qualitative data are necessary and they go on to champion the necessity of qualitative data collection: “To further this view, we seek in this book to further the systematization of the collection, coding and analysis of qualitative data for the generation of theory.” Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 19.

## 1.8 LANGUAGE USED FOR GOD

Contemporary Christian language tends to use predominantly male images and language to describe God, and this is perhaps even more pronounced among evangelicals who are the subject of this research. God is routinely referred to as “Father,” both in the Bible, in contemporary church literature and in verbal discourse among Christians. Also, in the course of history, most artistic representations of God have no doubt been of a male figure. And yet, as Tim Bulkeley points out, the Bible is replete with images of God as a mother as well as a father, and “there are pastoral, theological and cultural reasons to broaden our God-talk.”<sup>85</sup> Whilst being aware of this imbalance in use of language for God, this research needs in the first instance to accurately use the language of participants, which is exclusively male-gendered language. In my writing, where I refer to God rather than using participants’ expressions, I have tried to use gender-neutral language as far as possible, but on occasions where that were not possible, I have reverted to male-gendered terms. This decision was made in an attempt to minimize possible distraction for the reader: I fully acknowledge the male and female nature of God but felt that constant use of s/he or alternating use of he/she would hinder the flow of communication.

## 1.9 SUMMARY

In this introductory chapter, I began by discussing the idea that Christianity’s central belief in the death and resurrection of Christ has implications for believers in terms of their psychospiritual wellbeing. Having expressed my personal interest in this research, particularly with regard to evangelical beliefs, we then briefly explored the nature of evangelicalism as a part of the broader Protestant tradition. This was followed by a discussion of three psychological models, namely, Object relations theory, Attachment theory and Hall’s theory of implicit relational representations. The central focus of this thesis was developed due to the disparity of opinions concerning the role of beliefs about the atonement in affecting a believer’s wellbeing. A number of theologians and psychologists have suggested that specific beliefs about the atonement will have an impact on the wellbeing of those who hold those beliefs. However, Hall’s theory

---

<sup>85</sup> Tim Bulkeley, *Not Only a Father : Talk of God as Mother in the Bible & Christian Tradition* (Auckland, N.Z.: Archer Press, 2011), 7.



suggests instead that implicit relational representations will have the primary role in influencing a believer's perceptions of their relationship with God, and that explicit theological beliefs will carry less significance. Due to the lack of literature on this subject, grounded theory is proposed as the most suitable approach to explore this issue. This thesis, therefore, is research using grounded theory methodology, interviewing evangelical Christians to explore whether their beliefs about the atonement have impacted on their wellbeing, and if so to what effect.



## Chapter 2

### Atonement Theology

#### 2.1 INTRODUCTION

The execution of Jesus of Nazareth on a Roman cross two millennia ago is an historical event that stands at the crossroads of history. His death was a tragic end to his short public life, brought about by the machinations of the Jewish leaders and the controlling power of the Roman authorities. There was nothing particularly unique in his death, as it was one of the hundreds of crucifixions of the time. However, something dramatic changed for his disciples as a result, and instead of their faith dying with their leader, it blossomed, and within three hundred years Christianity had become the dominant religion under the rule of Constantine. Admittedly, it was not simply Jesus' death, but his life, death, resurrection and the coming of the Spirit that together impelled the early disciples on their own journeys of self-sacrifice. However, his death still stands at a turning point in history, as a moment that changed the lives of the humble men and women who had followed him, who subsequently had to grapple to understand the significance of his ignominious death of shame. This death still has the power to bring change to lives in our world – but how we understand the event, how we find meaning in the story of his death through the gulf of time and culture, how we seek to make sense of such a foreign event through the reading of the scriptures that emerged in the centuries after Jesus' death: these are questions that the church of Christ must still face and answer.

And this is no easy task. One contemporary definition of the atonement is given by Grudem as "...the work Christ did in his life and death to earn our salvation."<sup>1</sup> This simple definition is useful to define the general area under consideration, and yet, as we shall see, understanding what Christ accomplished through his death, what 'our salvation' might mean today, why Christ had to 'earn' this for us, and how this might impact on the lives of those who chose to follow him: these are matters of far greater complexity than can be contained in simple definitions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology : An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press ; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994), 568.

In the first few centuries of the early church, a number of theological debates arose as the church sought to clearly articulate its beliefs and establish doctrine. Doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation were soon established, and the essential elements presented in the various creeds that were written to outline the central beliefs of the church. While Christ's death is included in these creeds, the meaning and nature of his death receives virtually no attention. The Nicene Creed, formulated at the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE simply states the following regarding the work of Christ on the cross: "Who, for us men, and for our salvation... was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried..."

In this chapter, we will look first at some of the biblical material that is of relevance to our understanding of the atonement, from both Old and New Testaments. In particular, we will consider the range of metaphors that are used in the New Testament as ways of exploring the meaning of the work of the cross. We will then turn to consider some of the theories that have been put forward through the centuries to explain the meaning of the atonement. Before beginning this task however, we must first explore three important matters for our approach to this work.

## **2.2 THREE IMPORTANT CONCERNS**

### **2.2.1 THE IMPORTANCE OF LANGUAGE**

When we come to discuss the atonement, there are multiple issues concerning language that we must face if we are to approach the task with integrity. In the first instance, the word 'atonement' is of course not a word used in the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Old and New Testaments. Rather, 'atonement' is a composite word made by joining 'at' and 'onement' together, an innovation of William Tyndale in 1526 when he was seeking for a word that would translate the Hebrew '*kipper*' for his translation of the Bible.<sup>2</sup> '*Kipper*,' when used with reference to the Hebrew cult, usually has the meaning 'to cover over.'<sup>3</sup> '*Kipper*' comes from the Hebrew root *kpr*, from which also comes *kapporet*,

---

<sup>2</sup> Tom Stuckey, *The Wrath of God Satisfied? : Atonement in an Age of Violence* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012), 10. Johnson attributes the first use of 'atonement' to Thomas More in 1513.

<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the use of 'kipper,' particularly in Leviticus, see Stephen Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004), 36-44.

the 'mercy seat' above the Ark of the Covenant. *Kapporet* is translated in the Septuagint as *hilasterion*, which in turn, has been variously translated in English versions as 'propitiation,' 'expiation,' and 'place of atonement.' Clearly, these terms have a wide range of potential meanings and there has been extensive scholarly debate over the appropriateness of each translation.<sup>4</sup> This simplistic example serves to illustrate that we must be cautious about any approach that says anything along the lines of, "The Bible clearly says..."

Secondly, we need to be cognizant of, and sensitive to the fact that much of the language used in expressing meaning for Jesus' death is metaphorical language. In his major work on this subject, Colin Gunton reminds us that metaphors are "...finally unfathomable and present to the theologian ever new possibilities for insight and development. For the same reason, no final account can be given of what they mean..."<sup>5</sup> As well as being aware of the metaphorical nature of some language, we should also be aware that some language carries or implies meaning or meanings that may not have been intended by the original writers. As examples, terms such as 'appease,' 'propitiate,' or 'wrath' that are found in some English translations of the Bible may carry modern connotations that were not intended in the original renderings of the Hebrew or Greek language. This leads us to consideration of another important issue: that of cultural distance and contextual sensitivity.

## 2.2.2 THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT

It is always important to be mindful of the significance of historical and cultural context in our reading of the Biblical texts. While the event of the crucifixion of Christ continues to speak to people today, in the first instance we should seek to understand the event within the cultural context in which it occurred. Similarly, it is important for readers of scripture to seek to understand those texts within the contexts in which they were first written. To fail to do this places the reader in the position of attaching twenty-first century meanings to first century events, with the attendant risk of failing to understand

---

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of this contested translation issue, see J.M. Gundry-Volf, "Expiation, Propitiation, Mercy Seat," in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Ralph P. Martin Gerald F. Hawthorne, and Daniel G Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> Colin E. Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement a Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition* (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2003), 105.

the original intention of the author. As a simple example, the word ‘sacrifice’ has a range of meanings in today’s world that may have some relationship to sacrifice in the Old Testament, and yet to try to understand sacrifice in the first century without understanding the cultural context that gave rise to the Hebrew sacrificial system, or to impose a modern interpretation of sacrifice onto that system, undermines the potential to understand the meaning of that complex network of social and religious rituals.<sup>6</sup>

Similarly, we should also be aware of the social and cultural context that surrounds us as readers of Scripture today, and of the impact that our own cultural framework might impose on our understanding of the texts. Green and Baker describe the cultural narrative of the West as having emphases on “individualism and mechanism.”<sup>7</sup> Their concern with this dominant narrative is that it leads to a perspective in which sin and justice are understood in narrow, autobiographical terms and in which individual decision-making leads naturally to either reward or punishment. “In such a world...the death of Jesus is best understood in penal categories and salvation in forensic terms focused on the status of the individual before God.”<sup>8</sup>

In a similar vein, Darrin Belousek compellingly argues that the dominant approach to justice, war, and punishment in the West is based on a retributive paradigm that he traces back to Aristotle and Cicero. Belousek’s concern is that as Western Christians, if we read the biblical texts through the cultural lens of retributive practices, we risk a “backward reading”<sup>9</sup> that leads to seeing nothing other than retribution in those texts.<sup>10</sup> Inseparably tied to this retributive framework of the West’s cultural context, we are also deeply steeped in a litigious, judicial way of seeing the world. From a young age children learn the difference between good and bad behavior, and that there will be punishment for bad behavior. As adults, we expect punishment for wrongdoing, most

---

<sup>6</sup> For a short but superb description of sacrifice, especially atoning sacrifice in early Greek mythology and culture, see Martin Hengel, *The Atonement : The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981), 4-32. For a discussion of the Hebrew sacrificial systems of the Old Testament period see Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul’s Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 11-72.

<sup>7</sup> Mark D. Baker and Joel B. Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross : Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011), 42.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> This is a term used by Michael Hardin: Michael Hardin, “Out of the Fog: New Horizons for Atonement Theory,” in *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 63.

<sup>10</sup> Darrin W. Snyder Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace : The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012), 24-58.

usually framed within the context of a legal system that distributes justice as punishment.<sup>11</sup> We have a clear understanding of the power of the Court to remove freedom as punishment for breaking the law. I am not suggesting that this is completely wrong, simply that this cultural context forms a strong framework for our thinking about matters of justice, wrongdoing, and systems for making amends and that it is wise to be aware of the power of these cultural paradigms for influencing our understanding of the Bible, and in particular the work of Christ on the cross. As a specific example, in an on-line article about the atonement, Lehmann Strauss writes, “The Death of Christ was a purely legal operation. The Judge took upon Himself the penalty so that the judgment seat becomes the mercy seat. The prayer of the publican, ‘God be merciful to me a sinner’ (Luke 18:13), is literally, ‘God be *propitious* to me a sinner.’”<sup>12</sup>

Hans Boersma has similar concerns with the impact of our cultural norms on approaches to interpretation, and warns us against “juridicizing, individualizing and dehistoricizing the atonement.”<sup>13</sup> With reference specifically to atonement theology, Green and Baker express concern that popular atonement images focus on a definition of sin that is simply ‘disobedience’ and ‘infraction of the laws of God.’ Whilst they allow that these dimensions are important, they express concern that such an approach to Scripture falls far short of the whole narrative: “In fact, the painting that typically results from these beginning strokes of the brush lacks the texture and complexity necessary to account for the biblical witness.”<sup>14</sup>

### 2.2.3 THE QUESTION OF GOD’S WRATH

The wrath of God is an ever-present theme throughout the biblical narrative, emerging often in the Old Testament in God’s dealings with his people, as well as their enemies,

---

<sup>11</sup> As a simple illustration, in a recent television documentary on the 2010 disaster at the Pike River Mine that killed 29 men, the lawyer for the families of the men commented on the findings of a Royal Commission Report into the disaster, saying, “Real justice would come through criminal prosecution.”

<sup>12</sup> Lehman Strauss, “The Atonement of Christ,” <<https://bible.org/article/atonement-christ>> (Accessed 2 June 2004). (Emphasis in original). Use of an article of this popular, rather than scholarly nature, is not intended as indicative of all theologies of the atonement, but rather, to indicate the pervasive influence of judicial thinking in contemporary and popular thinking, even with regard to the biblical texts.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Boersma, “Violence, the Cross, and Divine Intentionality: A Modified Reformed View,” in *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 64.

<sup>14</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 240.

and then featuring again in the New Testament epistles, particularly in Paul's letter to the Romans. We need to address God's wrath in this discussion of the atonement, because in some models of the atonement, the death of Christ is seen as the solution to the problem of God's wrath.<sup>15</sup> Most notably, in penal substitution theory, it is God's wrath against the sin of humanity that is resolved by God pouring his wrath out on Christ instead of sinful humanity: as J.I. Packer puts it, "it is the sacrificial death ('blood') of Jesus Christ, God's incarnate Son, that quenches divine anger against sinners, just because Christ's death was a vicarious enduring of the penalty that was our due."<sup>16</sup> The word 'wrath' is of course heavily laden with emotion, and for many evangelical Christians it might conjure up images such as those suggested by the title of Jonathan Edwards' sermon, "Sinners in the hands of an angry God."<sup>17</sup> Charles Cranfield defines God's wrath in his commentary on Romans as: "Indignation against injustice, cruelty and corruption, which is the essential element of goodness and love in a world in which moral evil is present."<sup>18</sup> Chris Marshall agrees, suggesting that an understanding of God's wrath was so firmly embedded in the biblical tradition that readers of Paul would certainly have understood the term, which Marshall describes as designating "God's fervent reaction against human wickedness, God's refusal to tolerate, compromise with, or indulge evil."<sup>19</sup> However, it is important to point out that wrath is considered an act of God's will, rather than being essential to his character. We will consider this more fully shortly, but at this stage it will suffice to say that God's character is love: God is described as "Showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exodus 20:6).<sup>20</sup> In contrast, although God does get angry and punish people for their sin, he is never

---

<sup>15</sup> See for example Belousek's discussion, Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 213.

<sup>16</sup> J. I. Packer, "Anger," in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 382.

<sup>17</sup> This sermon was preached in 1741. It is heavy with images of hell, damnation, wickedness and the violent retributive anger of God. For example, his fourth point reads, "They are now the Objects of that very same Anger & Wrath of God that is expressed in the Torments of Hell: and the Reason why they don't go down to Hell at each Moment, is not because God, in whose Power they are, is not then very angry with them; as angry as he is with many of those miserable Creatures that he is now tormenting in Hell, and do there feel and bear the fierceness of his Wrath. Yea God is a great deal more angry with great Numbers that are now on Earth, yea doubtless with many that are now in this Congregation, that it may be are at Ease and Quiet, than he is with many of those that are now in the Flames of Hell." Jonathan Edwards, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God* (Boston: Kneeland & Green, 1741), 6-7. <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1053&context=etas> (Accessed 6 May 2017).

<sup>18</sup> C.E.B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975), 109.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher D. Marshall, *Beyond Retribution : A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), 171.

<sup>20</sup> See also Ex 34:6; Num 14:18 where God is acknowledged as "slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love."



described as “being angry” as part of his nature. Borchert expresses this in this way: “In the OT the wrath of God is not viewed as an essential attribute of God, but as an expression of his will as he deals with sinful and rebellious humankind in the context of history.”<sup>21</sup> It is also extremely important that even the anger he does express is not the capricious, random, inexplicable outburst that in ancient times was expected of the gods: the wrath of Yahweh was always contained, an action rather than an emotion, a response to a specific event, and “a measured commitment to act against evil and injustice in order to contain it and destroy it.”<sup>22</sup>

In what follows, we are going to consider three questions related to God’s wrath, first, what the causes of God’s wrath are, second, how his wrath is directed or worked out, and third, what circumstances mitigated against his wrath in the biblical accounts. With respect to the first question, Romans 1:18 tells us that, “The wrath of God is revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness of those who by their wickedness suppress the truth,” and yet this leaves us asking what “ungodliness and wickedness” means. In the Old Testament, God’s wrath is executed against the enemies of Israel, those nations that rebelled against Yahweh’s sovereignty, and it is also revealed against Israel herself.<sup>23</sup> When God’s wrath is turned on Israel, it is, almost without exception a response to Israel’s failure to keep the covenant with God.<sup>24</sup> Typically, these failures involved

---

<sup>21</sup> G.L. Borchert, “Wrath, Destruction,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 991. Pannenberg goes even further to say, “Wrath is not an attribute of God. His acts are not in general determined by it.” Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1988), 439. Cited in Joel B. Green, “Kaleidoscopic View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement : Four Views*, ed. James K. Eddy Paul R. Beilby (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), 174. In a less clear manner, Robinson contends that, “While God’s wrath is spontaneous to his own being, his wrath is called forth by the wickedness of his creatures,” leaving some questions as to whether God’s wrath is internal to God’s character or, as Pannenberg implies, external to God’s character. W.C. Robinson, “Wrath of God,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 1196.

<sup>22</sup> Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 117. See also Green, who comments, “Most generally, it is crucial that we not confuse the wrath of Yahweh with the retributive, begrudging and capricious dispositions of the Greek and Roman gods to whom sacrifices were offered in order to placate the deities and to solicit their favor. In spite of popular views of the ‘Old Testament God,’ divine wrath in the Old Testament is not well-represented by views of this kind. In fact, Old Testament scholars today continue to debate in what sense it is appropriate to attribute anger to God.” Green, “Kaleidoscopic View,” 174.

<sup>23</sup> “Yahweh’s wrath, as an expression of his holiness, his omnipotence and his sovereign, kingly rule, is executed against the nations who have rebelled against his sovereignty...wrath is also aimed at Israel for failing to live by the covenant which Yahweh established with the chosen nation.” Borchert, “Wrath, Destruction,” 991.

<sup>24</sup> Note however that Belousek concludes that, “...regarding what provokes God’s personal wrath, we do not find a consistent cause. In nearly all circumstances, it appears that God’s personal wrath expresses judgment on sin and transgression (i.e. evil-doing). But in at least one incident, God’s personal wrath was expressed with deadly consequences on account of inadvertent contact with the holy 2 Sam

idolatry, cultic transgressions and injustice. In this regard, Green and Baker comment, “Pervasively in the Old Testament God’s wrath is relationally based, not retributively motivated – that is, it is oriented toward the restoration or protection of God’s people, not toward retaliation or payback.”<sup>25</sup> Chris Marshall concurs, noting:

Interestingly, the first reference to God’s wrath in the Bible appears as Yahweh’s response not to generic human sinfulness but to whatever impedes God’s efforts to deliver his people from injustice and oppression (Exod 4:13-14; 15:7). After the establishment of the covenant with Israel, the major cause of divine wrath is Israel’s failure to abide by the terms of the covenant, including her obligation to social justice.<sup>26</sup>

Turning to our second question, regarding the outworking of God’s wrath, the first point to note is that God’s wrath is at times directed at individuals, sometimes toward either Israel or other nations, and sometimes toward humanity in general.<sup>27</sup> However, as we have noted, God’s wrath is always short-lived rather than ongoing. Although at times God expends his wrath in actively destructive ways, for example in the case of Sodom and Gomorrah, quite often his wrath is seen in his “giving up” the people to the consequences of their sin. Fiddes comments, “It is characteristic of Hebrew thought to depict God as ‘hiding his face’ from his disobedient people, or ‘letting them go.’ His righteous wrath against sin is worked out by his surrendering people to the way they themselves desire to tread.”<sup>28</sup> In the New Testament, wrath is depicted predominantly as an eschatological event, the “day of wrath” (Rom 2:5) at the end of time when God’s righteous judgment is revealed.<sup>29</sup> Paul’s letter to the Romans stands out as a depiction of God’s wrath,<sup>30</sup> and here, experience of wrath is not only eschatological, with Paul

---

6:6-7; 1 Chron 13:9-10) – for a cause other than sin... The explanation for God’s wrath is unclear in the Hebrew text and does not appear in the Greek version, leaving the meaning of the text in dispute.”

Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 212.

<sup>25</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 71.

<sup>26</sup> As corroborating texts Marshall lists the following: “Ps. 50:16-22; Isa. 1:23-24; 42:24-25; Amos 8:4-10; Mic. 6:9-16.” Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 169-70.

<sup>27</sup> See Belousek, who gives the following Psalms as evidence of these occurrences of God’s wrath: An individual person (Pss 6:1; 38:1; 88:16; 102:10, Num 16; 2 Sam 6:7), an entire nation or people (Pss 2:4-5, 12; 21:9; 78:31; 89:46; 106:23, 40), humanity in general (Pss 90:7-11; 110:5; Job 14), the enemies of Israel (Exod 15:7; 1 Sam 28:18), against Israel (Exod 32:10; Num 11:33; 2 Kgs 22:13, 17; 2 Chron 34:21; 36:16). Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 211.

<sup>28</sup> Paul S. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation : The Christian Idea of Atonement* (Louisville, KY.: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1989), 92.

<sup>29</sup> Marshall comments, “This conviction permeates New Testament literature from beginning to end. Indeed, the canonical narrative closes with this announcement: ‘See, I am coming soon; my reward is with me, to repay according to everyone’s work’ (Rev. 22:12, 18-21; cf. 11:18).” Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 176.

<sup>30</sup> Hanson refers to Romans 1: 18-32 as “a handbook to the working of wrath.” A.T. Hanson, *The Wrath of the Lamb* (London: S.P.C.K., 1957), 83. Cited in Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 170.

making clear in Romans 1:18-32 that God is currently handing people over to the consequences of their sin.<sup>31</sup> Most importantly, God's wrath as depicted in Rom 1:18 is not depicted as being poured out on people: rather, it is "revealed against all ungodliness and wickedness," in other words, "God's wrath is revealed against, not humanity itself, but the evildoing of humanity."<sup>32</sup>

Our third question concerns whether there are events or situations that might mitigate God extending his wrath against a person or persons. Belousek suggests that there are a diversity of causes that might turn away God's wrath on account of evildoing, and he suggests:

Sometimes God's wrath is satisfied in retributive punishment... Sometimes it is turned away by human actions, including priestly or prophetic intercession... or offering of incense...the righteous zeal of one acting on behalf of God...the transgressor's humility... or confession... and the nation's prayer and repentance... And many times God's wrath is turned away by God-self for his name's sake or because of his great mercy...<sup>33</sup>

Importantly, although the death of Christ is portrayed by the penal substitution model of the atonement as the event that turned God's wrath away from humanity, Baker and Green point out that, "The Old Testament never identifies Israel's sacrificial system as a means of averting or assuaging God's wrath; indeed it is telling that God's wrath is never mentioned in Leviticus."<sup>34</sup>

As mentioned above, the most significant New Testament account of the wrath of God is found in the letter to the Romans, where the causes and consequences of wrath are a

---

<sup>31</sup> See Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 78.

<sup>32</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 214.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 212. Supporting references listed are: Retributive punishment (Num 16:20-35; 2 Kgs 17:7-18; Isa 66:15; Zeph 1:7-18; Ps 78:49-51, 56-64). Intercession (Exod 32:7-14; Num 11:1-3; Numbers 14; Deut 9:15-21; Ps 106:23). Offering of incense (Num 16:41-50). The righteous zeal of one acting on behalf of God (Num 25:1-13). The transgressor's humility (2 Chron 32:24-26; Zeph 2:1-3; 3:11-13). Prayer and repentance (2 Chron 7:13-14; Jer 4:1-4; Jonah 3). By God-self for his name's sake or because of his great mercy (Isa 12:1; 48:9-11; 57:16-19; Jer 3:12-14; Ezek 20:7-9; 13-14, 21-22; 36:16-32; Dan 9:15-19; Hos 14:4; Pss 6:4; 78:38; 85:1-3; 106:45).

<sup>34</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 71. In contrast, supporting the claim that the death of Christ propitiates God's wrath, Packer writes that the cross was intended to "dissolve his judicial wrath against us..." J. I. Packer, "The Atonement in the Life of the Christian," in *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives* ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 416. However, because of the clear evidence that the sacrificial system was not intended to assuage God's wrath, it is unclear as to how penal substitution theory can claim that Christ's death as a sacrifice can operate in this way.

main focus for the first three chapters.<sup>35</sup> C.H. Dodd noted that “Paul never uses the verb, ‘to be angry,’ with God as subject” and that ‘wrath’ when used of God is “curiously impersonal,” leading him to the conclusion that wrath is “not a certain feeling or attitude of God toward us, but some process or effect in the objective realm of facts.”<sup>36</sup> Following this proposal there has been extensive debate as to whether God’s wrath is *affective* (something God feels) or *effective* (something God does). For Dodd, wrath is not so much God’s activity against sinful humanity as it is “the inevitable result, or consequence, of human sin in a moral universe – a calculable effect of certain behaviors or attitudes.”<sup>37</sup> However, Marshall argues that while God’s wrath is not a vindictive or capricious anger, it is also not simply a result of cause and effect in the universe, rather, Paul’s three claims of “God gave them up...” (Rom 1:24, 26, 28) imply God’s personal and active participation in wrath. He concludes:

Wrath is not, therefore, an ontological attribute of God’s nature or a function of God’s personality. It is an expression of God’s will that is contingent upon the existence of evil. If there were no sin in the world, there would be no occasion for wrath.<sup>38</sup>

In Romans 1, where Paul says the “wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness” (1:18) he goes on to lay out an account of this “ungodliness and wickedness” that traverses the full scope of human failings: including idolatry (1:23), unnatural sexual passions (1:26-27), “evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless” (1:29-31). Having established that all of humanity has failed through sinfulness (Rom 3: 9-18; 23), Paul concludes in the pivotal statement that redemption can be found in Christ: “whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed” (Rom 3:25, NRSV). One approach to reading these first three chapters of Romans is to hear Paul’s words as an account of

---

<sup>35</sup> Marshall notes “scattered references” to wrath in the Gospels and general epistles (Mark 14:36; Luke 14:21; 21:23; Matt 18:34; 22:7; John 3:36; Heb 3:11; 4:3; James 1:19-20) and the preponderance of references in Paul (Rom 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; 4:15; 5:9; 9:22; 12:19; 13:4; 1 Thess 1:10; 2:16; 5:9; cf. Col 3:6; Eph 5:6). Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 170.

<sup>36</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (New York: Harper & Row, 1932), 21-22. Cited in Borchert, “Wrath, Destruction,” 991.

<sup>37</sup> Borchert, “Wrath, Destruction,” 991.

<sup>38</sup> Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 171.

the human problem of sin causing the wrath of God toward humanity; wrath which is then averted through the sacrifice of Christ. Romans 3:25 is central to this project because it posits a solution to the problem of sin that has been expounded in the first chapter. However, it is clear from Romans 1 that the wrath of God has not been averted; rather, the wrath of God has been revealed as God “gave them up” to the “lusts of their hearts.” In other words, the sinful activity that people engage in is not the object of God’s wrath so much as the outworking of that wrath. In this regard, Baker and Green comment, “...sinful activity is the consequence of God’s letting the human family go its own way – and this ‘letting the family go its own way’ constitutes God’s wrath... Our sinful acts do not invite God’s wrath but prove that God’s wrath is already active.”<sup>39</sup> God’s wrath is active in that he “gives up” people to the consequences of their own actions, so these consequences follow from God’s will rather than from a passive, cause-effect principle. I. Howard Marshall expresses this conclusion in this way:

God’s judgment upon sin is the abandoning of sinners to a situation without him, so that they are left under the power of sin and false gods that cannot save, and the end result is death. That is the nature of judgment, in that God wills it to be so. It leaves sinners to their own sin.<sup>40</sup>

Such a reading of Romans requires an approach to Rom 3:25 that does not posit God sacrificing his son in order to assuage the demands of his wrath. We will return again to this text later in this chapter. In the cross, we do see God’s wrath, but it is not wrath poured out on Christ. Just as God wills his wrath on people who follow their passions, so we see God’s wrath in the cross as sinful humanity works out its evil in killing Christ. Chris Marshall contends that Paul’s primary concern in his consideration of divine wrath is not retributive justice, but instead the framework of covenant justice, where

---

<sup>39</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 79.

<sup>40</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *Aspects of the Atonement : Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling of God and Humanity* (London; Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007), 61. Other scholars conclude likewise, for example: “God’s wrath therefore is the symbol for the destruction that humans bring on themselves by rebelling against the truth... It is a retribution that results, not at the whim of an angry despot but as the necessary consequence of a self-distorted existence.” Luke Timothy Johnson, *Reading Romans : A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2001), 33. “This is the ‘wrath of God’: to grant humans their desires when their desires are lusts, to grant men and women their self-indulgent choices – and the consequences of those choices.” James D. G. Dunn, *The Theology of Paul the Apostle* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1998), 122-23. Cited in Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 219.

wrath is the result of breaches of the covenant and where God works to restore the covenant, liberating and restoring his people. So Marshall:

The cross supremely reveals God's wrath not because sinners are vicariously punished in the experience of Christ but because the cross definitively subverts and destroys the principle of sin itself. Facing the horror of crucifixion, Jesus totally refused to defend himself. He triumphed over evil without employing the mechanisms of evil to do so, thereby breaking the grip of evil over the human heart, thus satisfying the ultimate purpose of God's wrath.<sup>41</sup>

In this brief review of the meaning of God's wrath, we have concluded that wrath is a function of God's will in response to the evil in the world, rather than an expression of his fundamental character. His wrath is expressed at various times toward individuals, Israel, other nations, and humanity in general, and is expressed in a variety of different ways, including God "turning his face away" from people and leaving them to the consequences of their sin. However, many different factors also mitigate God's wrath, including, but not limited to, the action of a righteous one acting on God's behalf. In considering Paul's account of wrath in the opening chapters of Romans, we concluded that he was not presenting a transactional account of God pouring his wrath on Christ on the cross, but rather, within a covenantal framework explaining that in the cross God has confronted the evil poured out on Christ, and in doing so beaten the powers of evil.

## **2.3 BIBLICAL MATERIALS**

### **2.3.1 OLD TESTAMENT IMAGES**

In this section we will be considering a range of materials in the Hebrew Old Testament that have relevance to atonement theology because they in some way form a background to the death of Christ on the cross and the way that this event was interpreted and presented by New Testament writers. Our intention is only to survey and summarise some of the material, rather than to provide an exhaustive account of all relevant texts.

---

<sup>41</sup> Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 173.

### 2.3.1.1 Ransom – Release from Captivity

At the start of the story of Israel, the people are in captivity in Egypt; slaves in a land that is not their own. God reveals himself to Moses and discloses the way that he will release Israel from their captivity and lead them to the ‘promised land.’<sup>42</sup> The Passover meal is thus instituted: each family kills and eats a roast lamb, whose blood had been sprinkled on the door posts of the house, and that night God ‘passes over’ the houses of the Hebrews, sparing them from the first-born deaths inflicted on the homes of the Egyptians. As a result, the Egyptian Pharaoh finally decides to release the Hebrews from their captivity. God then covenants with the people, announcing his character in Exodus 34:6: “The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.” Over time, the people struggle to be faithful to the covenant, but each time they stray, the faithful God of Israel acts to redeem them again. This is the overarching, sweeping narrative of the Old Testament: God is faithful and loving towards his people, Israel, and even when they fail repeatedly, God acts to ransom/redeem them and bring them back. On many occasions, as depicted in the book of Isaiah, the people find themselves in captivity again, and God again promises to ransom/redeem them and return them to their homeland.<sup>43</sup>

Redemption in modern understanding usually implies some sort of payment in exchange for what is redeemed. In the case of God’s redemption of Israel however, it is unclear what payment might be implied in God’s redeeming action. In fact, whether God would have to make a payment to achieve his purposes, and if so, to whom it would be paid, stand as questions to remind us again of the dangers of applying twenty-first century meanings to interpretations of these ancient Hebrew texts. What we can hopefully accept, is that God’s intentions towards his people are to bring them out of captivity and into a place where they can then freely worship him.

---

<sup>42</sup> See Exodus 6: 6-8, 12:1-13 and also Deut 7:8.

<sup>43</sup> See for example Isa 43:1-3.

### 2.3.1.2 Sacrifice – Covering over Sin

The book of Leviticus, chapters 1-7 lays out a complex system of sacrificial offerings to be made to God, covering a wide range of situations necessitating sacrifice.<sup>44</sup> Some sacrifices were offered as 'burnt offerings' (Lev 1:1-17), some as 'grain offerings' (Lev 2:1-16), and some as 'offerings of well-being' (Lev 3:1-17). In addition to these offerings, two further sacrifices covered situations where the people had, either knowingly or unknowingly, broken some aspect of God's commands. In these situations, the people incurred guilt and the guilt became a 'stain' on, or a pollution of the people in God's sight. In these situations, a 'sin offering' (*batta't*) (Lev 4:1 – 5:13) or a 'guilt offering' (*asham*) (Lev 5:14 – 6:7) would be made which would 'atone' (*kipper*) for the sin and the person would be forgiven. Often, such an offering would also involve some sort of restitution being made toward an offended party. The sense in which atonement (*kipper*) is used is that it 'covers over' the stain or pollution of the sin committed. The repeated pattern through Leviticus 4-6 is that the priest offers the sacrifice as an atonement (*kipper*) for the party concerned and they are then forgiven. Discussing Jacob Milgrom's work,<sup>45</sup> Finlan concludes, "Hebrew sacrifice is not a matter of substitutionary death, but concerns the purity of the temple, which was a kind of spiritual barometer registering the degrees and kinds of sins committed in Israel."<sup>46</sup> Koch concurs, and commenting on the sin offering comments, "Nevertheless, the viewpoint of cleansing and averting contamination is dominant."<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>44</sup> Sacrifices were, of course, common in all cultures of the Ancient Near East at the time. For a discussion of sacrifice in antiquity, see Hengel, *The Atonement : The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, 1-28. Some societies still practiced human sacrifice and so a system delimiting the scope of sacrifice can perhaps be seen as a step towards a more advanced culture. Chalke suggests "The emphasis on Yahweh's apparent appetite for continuous appeasement through blood sacrifice...is to be understood...as a reflection of the worship practices of the pagan cults of the nations that surrounded the people of Israel. However, the story of Israel's salvation is the story of her journey away from these primal practices towards a new and more enlightened understanding by way of Yahweh's self-revelation." Steve Chalke, "The Redemption of the Cross," in *The Atonement Debate*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008), 38. Later in the Old Testament story, the sacrificial system itself becomes a hindrance to genuine worship and we find a number of references that suggest that God was not changed by the sacrifices offered – rather, the sacrificial system existed for the sake of the people. See for example Hos 6:6; Ps 40:6-8; Ps 51:16-17.

<sup>45</sup> See Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1991).

<sup>46</sup> Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 33.

<sup>47</sup> Klaus Koch, "Some Considerations on the Translation of *Kapporet* in the Septuagint," in *Pomegranates and Golden Bells : Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman, and Avi Hurvitz (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995), 68. Regarding the sacrificial rituals, Fiddes similarly concludes "They were an act by which it was believed that God overcame the human predicament of estrangement from himself, removed



In discussing the logic of atonement (*kipper*) in the Pentateuch, Finlan suggests a range of functions achieved through sacrifice. In the earliest accounts, God is said to be appeased by the 'pleasing odor' of the burnt sacrifice (Gen 8:20). In later accounts, the central feature becomes the sprinkling of blood rather than the smoke, and this blood has the purpose of purifying rather than appeasing.<sup>48</sup> A centrally important verse is Leviticus 17:11: "For the life of the flesh is in the blood; and I have given it to you for making atonement for your lives on the altar; for, as life, it is the blood that makes atonement." Finlan contends that for the Hebrews, life was a force contained within blood, so that blood, carrying life-force could be used ritually to reverse the effects of sin: "When the blood is poured on a ritually-polluted temple installation, the life-force cleans away the anti-life force, pollution."<sup>49</sup> Finlan also contends that a further function of the sacrifices is related to the idea of ransom (*kopher*), whereby the sacrifice was also seen as a compensatory payment to God.<sup>50</sup> Notwithstanding this dimension of payment seen within the sacrificial system, the cultic practices were, first and foremost, God's provision of a method by which the people could be cleansed from the build up of sin. It is God who acts through the sacrificial system to make atonement, or to cover over the effects of sin. "In such instances, expiation, forgiveness, etc. are not the direct *physical effect* of the rites performed. Such acts are prerequisite, but not causational. It is God who grants the desired result!"<sup>51</sup>

### 2.3.1.3 The Day of Atonement – the Scapegoat

The Day of Atonement (*Yom Kippur*) as outlined in Leviticus 16, was a specific annual event, set apart to address atonement for all Israel: "For on this day atonement shall be

---

guilt, and freed his people from the threat of just punishment which lay upon the whole community." Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 64.

<sup>48</sup> Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 43. Finlan is discussing the work of Gorman: Frank H. Gorman Jr., *Ideology of Ritual Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology*, JsoT Sup91 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr, 1990), 184.; Brichto: Herbert Chanan Brichto, *On Slaughter and Sacrifice, Blood and Atonement* ([Cincinnati]: [Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion], 1976), 28, 34.; and Milgrom: Milgrom, *Leviticus 1-16 : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*.

<sup>51</sup> Baruch A. Levine, *In the Presence of the Lord : A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974), 65-66. (Emphasis in original). See also Belousek, who warns us against getting the cause-effect relationship backward by thinking that the sacrifice is the cause that acts on God to create atonement: rather, atonement is the cause, God's action that effects cleansing and re-establishes the covenant. "God acts to cleanse and forgive sinners by removing sin and pollution through sacrifice, thereby restoring covenant relationship. Divine justice is done here, but it is restorative justice, not retributive justice." Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 191.

made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD” (Lev 16:30). In the ritual of the Day of Atonement, the priest would, by sacrificing first a bull and then a goat as a sin offering, make atonement for the sanctuary, the tent of the meeting, the altar, the priests and all the people of the assembly (Lev 16:33).<sup>52</sup> In these sin offerings, the priest sprinkles the blood of the bull and the goat on the mercy seat (*hilasterion*) over the Ark of the Covenant. We will re-encounter the *hilasterion* later in Paul’s writings in the New Testament. What is peculiar to the Day of Atonement is that in a separate ritual, the priest presents a goat to the Lord, who is said to make atonement over it (Lev 16:10). The priest then lays hands on the goat and “confess[es] over it all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, all their sins, putting them on the head of the goat, and sending it away into the wilderness...” (Lev 16:21). Thus the animal becomes a scapegoat, carrying away the sins of the people in this annual ceremony of cleansing and purification. It is note-worthy that on the Day of Atonement, the goat, which has the sins of the people transferred to it, is not then sacrificed: it remains alive to carry the sins away. The other goat, which is sacrificed, has its blood sprinkled on the *hilasterion*, but this goat is a standard sin offering and its sacrifice effects the atonement or cleansing of the objects of the sanctuary and altar because they are unclean due to the uncleanness, transgressions and sins of the people.

So far, we have seen a range of different images and approaches within the Old Testament towards people’s need to maintain relationship with God. Most importantly, God, who, in the first instance made a covenant with the people, and subsequently established the mechanisms by which they might remain in relationship with their God, drives this need for relationship. As twenty-first century Christian readers, we must take care not to conflate these various images in ways not intended. For example, whilst it might be common Christian practice to think of the Passover lamb as a sacrifice, it was not so in terms of the Hebrew sacrificial cult. While the animal was of course killed for a purpose, this event not only pre-dates the establishment of the sacrificial rituals, it also bears none of the hallmarks of those sacrifices.<sup>53</sup> In a similar way, while the idea of a

---

<sup>52</sup> Note that the sin offerings were not just related to the sins of the people: the tent, sanctuary and even the altar were tainted by sin and needed to be atoned for to ‘cover over’ the effects of the sins of the people. Note also that the sin offerings described were for unintentional sins, not active rebellion in transgressing against God’s commands.

<sup>53</sup> “The original ritual was focused around family and home: the Passover lamb was slain not by the priest but by the family head; it was not offered on the temple altar but was eaten at the family table; and its blood was not poured out at the base of the temple altar but smeared on the doorposts and lintel of

scapegoat has entered our culture's language, its use as a metaphor might have blurred understanding of some of the original function of the scapegoat. Significantly, the scapegoat was not sacrificed in the Day of Atonement ritual: rather, it escaped being sacrificed.

#### 2.3.1.4 The Suffering Servant - Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12

The Fourth Servant Song is included in this discussion of Old Testament images of atonement, because for Christians, it is arguably the most recognizable reference within the Old Testament to the person of Christ.<sup>54</sup> However, while many Christian readers will approach this text with singularly Christological lenses, it is also true that for scholars this is perhaps the “most contested chapter in the Old Testament.”<sup>55</sup> The passage is easily appropriated as prophetic of Christ because of language such as “He was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities: upon him was the punishment that made us whole, and by his bruises we are healed,” (Isa 53:5) and “He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth” (Isa 53:7). It is also true that the New Testament authors reference the Isaiah passage as pointing to Christ, and Jesus himself seems to have also understood his own ministry in light of the Servant of Isaiah.<sup>56</sup>

However, a wise approach to the passage is to let it speak first in its own context, before considering it as speaking prophetically about Christ. Such a ‘backward reading’ may

---

the family home. The Passover event itself concerned, moreover, not remission of sins, but aversion of destruction and redemption from slavery.” Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 161.

<sup>54</sup> Use of the term “Servant Songs” is a result of the seminal work of Bernard Duhm, who in 1892 identified and named the four passages, Isa 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12. Duhm proposed that the Servant Song passages were of separate origin to the rest of Isaiah 40-55, and although his assertions are now strongly contested, his naming of the passages has remained. For discussion, see John Goldingay, *The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A Literary-Theological Commentary* (London; New York: T & T Clark, 2005), 149-50.

<sup>55</sup> Brevard S. Childs, *Isaiah* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 410. Likewise, Hermisson suggests that, “The historical and theological understanding of this great text will remain controversial until kingdom come,” as a consequence in part of “...the innumerable difficulties of this text.” Hans-Jurgen Hermisson, “The Fourth Servant Song in the Context of Second Isaiah,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 17,22.

<sup>56</sup> For example, Matthew cites Isaiah 42:1-3 as referring to Jesus (Matthew 12:18-21). At the last supper, Jesus uses the words of Isaiah 53:12 “poured out for many...” to refer to his own shedding of blood (Matthew 26:28). In Acts 8:35 Luke records that Philip interpreted Isaiah 53:7-8 to the Ethiopian eunuch as referring to Jesus.

read an understanding of atonement into the passage that is not necessarily there. For example when we read “Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him with pain. When you make his life an offering for sin (*batta’t*), he shall see his offspring, and shall prolong his days...” (Isa 53:10) as speaking exclusively of Christ we might draw the conclusion that God made Christ a sin offering and killed him, which would be a hasty and erroneous reading of this text.

While there is much in Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 which can fruitfully be applied to Christ, in the first instance the passage should be read within its context in the sweeping poetic narrative of the book of Isaiah.<sup>57</sup> Here we find Israel-Jacob, the people of God, presented as servants of God, but as they struggle to be faithful to God they end up in captivity in Babylon. Isaiah prophesies the return from captivity, but in an unprecedented way this deliverance turns out to have far wider ramifications. In the servant songs we are introduced to an un-named servant, who, unlike Israel-Jacob, is able to remain righteous, suffers on behalf of the people, and in so doing brings Israel-Jacob back to God. In the context of Second and Third Isaiah, we see, however, a wider role for the servant. Where we first read that the servant was to be a “light to the nations” (Isa 42:6, 49:6), later we read regarding Israel that “Nations shall come to your light” (Isa 60:3). Again, initially we read that the servant “shall make many righteous” (Isa 53:11), and later we find of Israel that “Your people shall all be righteous” (Isa 60:21). In other words, the role of the servant has successfully been passed back to servant Israel, and now the relationship of God with Israel is extended to the nations: to foreigners who would previously not have been able to be included in the covenant with

---

<sup>57</sup> Murray Rae helpfully discusses the plurality of meanings possible in biblical texts, suggesting that texts may legitimately be understood in ways that differ from the “original meaning” intended by the author, but also considering what limits to hermeneutical freedom might need to be applied. His discussion locates around the Fourth Servant Song, and he concludes, “The fourth servant song as it is now placed within Deutero-Isaiah was clearly intended to announce both God’s intervention to end the Babylonian Exile and the renewal of Israel’s righteousness. In time, however, the text is read in other contexts and takes on new meanings... These meanings are congruent with that of Deutero-Isaiah, however, and are therefore also legitimate instances of hermeneutical plurality, so long as, under divine guidance, they bear witness truly to where God is at work in the world. This is especially true, Christians believe, of Jesus of Nazareth, of whom the text may be taken to speak with a particular poignancy. Christians need not claim this, however, as the determinate interpretation. It is no threat to the christological reading of Isa 53 to recognize that God has also used this text to comfort Israel in exile and in holocaust...” Murray Rae, “Texts in Context: Scripture and the Divine Economy,” *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (2007): 21.

God.<sup>58</sup> Thus we see that the trajectory of Second and Third Isaiah takes us on a sweeping journey from a faithless people, through a model servant who suffers “for our transgressions,” to a people who now have the Lord’s hand on them, even including “the nations” as is indicated by “...the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord...and to be his servants...” (Isa 56:6).

What is striking about the passage is the portrayal of the servant of God. While the Old Testament is clear that the prophetic role could lead to suffering and death, this Isaian account of suffering and death leading to wholeness for others is entirely unprecedented.<sup>59</sup> The astonishing revelation of Isaiah 52:13 – 53:12 is that the servant of the Lord successfully achieves his mission to include the nations in Israel’s covenant by following a path of humility and suffering. In Hebrew thought, the idea that the Messiah would fit the description of the suffering servant would have made no sense at all.<sup>60</sup> In that regard, the Servant songs cannot refer to the Messiah. And yet Jesus seemed to understand his own life and ministry in light of the suffering servant. What this passage teaches us theologically is the same message that Jesus would later drive home in his ministry – God exalts the lowly, has different plans for the renewal of his people than we expect, and therefore our expectations are likely to be turned upside-down.

There are several unique claims in the fourth Servant Song that challenge existing wisdom and proclaim a new standard for any who would be servants of the Lord. Isaiah 53:4 tells us, “Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases,” and then in v. 6b this is reinforced with “...and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” The vicarious suffering of the servant, in which he takes the place of those who should rightfully suffer, is an astonishing reversal of the normally accepted “action-

---

<sup>58</sup>For more regarding this idea of the transfer of the role of the servant to Zion, see W.A.M. Beuken, “The Main Theme of Trito-Isaiah ‘the Servants of Yahweh’,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 70-71.

<sup>59</sup>On this subject, see Blenkinsopp who writes, “That suffering and violent death can be the price to pay for a prophetic mission is attested in the biblical record, but that they can have a positive, salvific effect on others, that a prophet can substitute for others by taking on himself the consequences of their wrongdoing (as is claimed for the prophetic Servant in ch. 53) is unprecedented, even if it is not entirely unanticipated.” Joseph Blenkinsopp, *Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 119.

<sup>60</sup>Wright argues against this idea, suggesting that there is evidence that some Jews did interpret the servant figure messianically. N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 589-90.

consequences connection”<sup>61</sup> according to which suffering is understood as a consequence of guilt. In the fourth Servant Song the servant takes on himself the guilt that is the consequence of other’s actions and thereby vicariously bears the guilt of others.<sup>62</sup> The truly guilty, in this case Israel, find themselves in the amazing position of having their natural guilt discharged as a consequence of the servant’s actions. When they recognize that the suffering of the servant is a consequence of their guilt and not the servant’s, they are changed by this recognition, and those that make this confession, “...return to the community of Yahweh as the Servant’s ‘offspring’ (vv. 10-11).”<sup>63</sup> As Spieckermann puts it, “*God makes the Servant’s righteousness a part of the vicarious event.* The servant makes the many righteous and thereby breaks the bounds of previous conceptions of individual retribution and prophetic intercession.”<sup>64</sup> Here we are introduced to the startling new reality of a role reversal whereby one person takes the place expected for the many and in doing so releases them from the expected consequences of their evil actions. In the wider context of Second Isaiah’s account of the people of Israel in exile as a consequence of their disobedience, in this vicarious place-taking of the servant, Israel is released from its suffering. “Therefore the Servant’s suffering is, at its core, about the *salvation* of Israel and – in the context of the Servant Songs – about the *salvation* of the nations.”<sup>65</sup> This salvation of Israel and the nations however is not achieved in a way that might have been expected. This is not salvation achieved through military conquest and no king rises to exert his authority and might. Instead, the Servant Songs provide a model of success that by every accepted standard

---

<sup>61</sup> Janowski discusses this traditional view of reality that holds that those who suffer do so because of their sin (see Isaiah 53:4b “Yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted.”) whereas the righteous do not suffer as a consequence of their righteousness. See Bernd Janowski, “He Bore Our Sins: Isaiah 53 and the Drama of Taking Another’s Place,” in *The Suffering Servant : Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 49-51.

<sup>62</sup> Many understand Isaiah 53:10 “an offering for sin” as speaking in terms of the cultic sacrificial system and consequently see the servant’s suffering and death in these terms as a sacrificial offering made to God. We are here following Janowski’s argument that the term “asam” (offering) comes not from cultic practice but from “the *situation of obligation arising from guilt*, in which the guilty person must provide material compensation to discharge this guilt...” *ibid.*, 69.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>64</sup> Hermann Spieckermann, “The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament,” *ibid.*, 14.

<sup>65</sup> Bernd Janowski, “He Bore Our Sins,” 66. Note however that the servant has also been understood as a range of individuals, including Persian King Cyrus and also as Israel itself. The identity of the Servant remains one of the most contested dimensions of Old Testament scholarship. For a brief discussion of the potential identities of the servant, see Rae, “Texts in Context: Scripture and the Divine Economy,” 6-10.

should be failure.<sup>66</sup> Here is a startling new reality: powerlessness and self-sacrifice has power to bring about change, the realization of wrong and a subsequent return to obedience to God. Whilst the Servant Songs were not written *in the first instance* as prophetic of Jesus, they are a flash of insight in the midst of the Old Testament to a new and radical way. Jesus later will see his own life and ministry in light of this great revelation.

#### 2.3.1.5 Summary

We have briefly surveyed four Old Testament themes that speak into the relationship God has with his people, the formation of covenant with the people and the lengths he has gone to in order to maintain that covenant and restore the people whenever they have strayed. In the Old Testament, themes of redemption and the loving faithfulness of God to redeem his people loom very large, despite the constant failure of the people to recognize this provision. We now turn to see how these themes are played out in the writings of the New Testament.

### 2.3.2 NEW TESTAMENT IMAGES

The saving work of Christ includes his whole career, including his incarnation, through his life and ministry, death, resurrection and ascension. In what follows, this understanding is implicit even though at times the discussion will focus specifically on the work of Christ on the cross: yet it is clear that his death cannot be isolated from the wider context of his life.

#### 2.3.2.1 The Gospels

In the Gospels, although Jesus speaks about his suffering, death and resurrection on a number of occasions, he says little that indicates his interpretation of those events. His focus, in contrast, is on healing people who are ill, proclaiming salvation to those who

---

<sup>66</sup> On this theme, see Rimbach's discussion of the "model servant" – a "loser' who wins – and wins by 'losing,' 'succeeds' by failure of every accepted standard." James A. Rimbach, "Model Servant/Servant Model," *Concordia Journal* 10, no. 1 (1984): 17.

are lost and announcing the coming of the Kingdom of God.<sup>67</sup> Though he did not speak much about his death, his message of the coming kingdom certainly foreshadowed the manner of his death. At the heart of Jesus' message was a new way of envisioning relationships based on the justice-doing and peacemaking of God. Belousek claims that Jesus' teaching of kingdom principles inverted the law of retribution that commands a like-for-like payback, and instead inaugurated a new rule of "do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matt 7:12a). "Instead of returning harm for harm, injury for injury, evil for evil, 'tit for tat,' the way of God's kingdom renounces retaliatory resistance to evil, returns right for wrong, good for evil, and seeks to overcome evil with good (Matt 5:38-48; Luke 6:27-38)."<sup>68</sup> In this regard, Jesus' death was fully consistent with his teaching.

Jesus refers to his impending death a number of times, but accords meaning to the event on one key occasion. In Mark 10:45 (with parallel in Matthew 20:28), known as the 'Ransom saying,' Jesus says, "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.' That this is a reference to his death is indicated by the phrase, 'give his life a ransom for many,' and yet it is important to note the first part of the phrase. In response to his disciples' argument about who would be the greatest, Jesus responds by saying that he has come to serve. Jesus understood the continuity between his life mission and his death; they cannot be isolated from each other, and so Jesus' assertion that he has come to serve speaks about his death on the cross as well as to his actions in life.

Ransom (*Greek* = *lytron*) refers most directly to the purchase price of a slave to release them from captivity, but comes from a group of terms related to redemption, or being set free.<sup>69</sup> Because of the inclusion of the word in the statement of Jesus giving his own life, it is easy to place this saying within a context of sacrificial giving, but this is not the immediate context. It would also be possible, given the metaphor of financial exchange of money for a slave, to suggest that Jesus' giving of his own life was in some way a

---

<sup>67</sup> Luke 19:10: "The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost." For discussion of the Kingdom of God in Jesus' teaching, including the Old Testament background to this proclamation, see Christopher D. Marshall, *Kingdom Come : The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus* (Auckland, N.Z.: BCNZ, 1990).

<sup>68</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> See Baker and Green for a summary of the main Greek terms referring to redemption/ransom. Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 126.



payment made to some third party in exchange for the lives of “the many.” However, this presses the metaphor too far and risks reducing Jesus’ enigmatic expression to a mechanical exchange process. As Morris comments regarding the saying, “We must not press it beyond what the New Testament tells us about it. To look for a recipient of the ransom is illegitimate.”<sup>70</sup>

Instead, the correct context for the ransom saying is within the narrative of God’s people. As we have seen, the people of Israel are first redeemed from captivity in Egypt and called into covenant with God as his chosen people. Later in their story, the people find themselves in captivity again, this time in Babylon, and in the book of Isaiah we repeatedly read Isaiah’s re-telling the story of their ransom/redemption and hopeful looking forward to a time of ransom/redemption from Babylon.<sup>71</sup> In Second Isaiah, just as the servant is called to bring Israel back to God, so too Israel is called to bring the nations to God. In Isaiah 42:6b-7 we read, “I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that were blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness.” In Luke’s gospel, Jesus begins his ministry by quoting from Isaiah 61, where he read, “He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor (Lk 4:18b).”<sup>72</sup>

As noted above, it is important to note that the concept of ransom should not be forced as a rigid transaction. God ransoms Israel from slavery in Egypt, but that is not to say that God pays Egypt for the release of his people. Following this precedent, in Isaiah 45 God says that he has “aroused Cyrus in righteousness...he shall build my city and set my exiles free, not for price or reward...” (Isa 45:13), and later we read “For thus says the Lord: You were sold for nothing, and you shall be redeemed without money” (Isa 52:3). The redemption of Israel from captivity so that they can become a light to all the

---

<sup>70</sup> Leon Morris, *The Atonement, Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove, Ill., USA: InterVarsity Press, 1983), 129.

<sup>71</sup> Wright makes the case that “Isaiah 40-55 as a whole was thematic for Jesus’ kingdom-announcement.” Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 603. This is not the same of course as Stott’s assertion that Jesus, in his ransom saying was identifying himself as the suffering servant in Isaiah 53 who offered his life as an offering for sin (Is 53:10). Stott’s assertion is based on very thin textual evidence, whereas Wright picks up the glaring theme of the redemption of Israel through Second Isaiah. See John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 146-47. For critique of Stott’s position, see Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 146-48.

<sup>72</sup> Luke also reaffirms the redemptive nature of Jesus mission in the closing chapter where the disciples on the road to Emmaus lament “But we had hoped he was the one to redeem Israel” (Lk 24:21).

nations is part of the sweeping biblical narrative that Jesus expresses and places himself within in this first saying, both through his life and teaching and by extension, through his death.

The second explicit reference from Jesus regarding his death is found in the Passion narratives depicting the Last Supper. Mark records Jesus as handing the cup to his disciples and saying “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Mk 14:24). Matthew follows Mark but adds “...for the forgiveness of sins” (Mt 26:28) and Luke adds that the cup is “...the new covenant in my blood” (Lk 22:20). Contemporary Christian readers might read the reference to blood, connect this with the idea of the Passover lamb as having been killed sacrificially, and conclude wrongly that Jesus was making reference to his own death as being a sacrifice akin to the animals killed on the altar of the temple. This is particularly so in Matthew’s Gospel with the inclusion of the phrase “...for the forgiveness of sins.” However, the killing of the Passover lamb was not part of the Hebrew sacrificial system.<sup>73</sup> Further, while Jesus’ reference to the covenant places the event within the context of the blood shed in the covenant event in Exodus 24:8, that blood is also not sacrificial. McKnight clarifies the difference between the blood of the covenant, the blood shed at Passover and the blood of animals sacrificed as offerings for atonement.<sup>74</sup> Despite the cultural distance, Christians should not confuse or conflate these different events in Hebrew history.

That the events of the last supper happen at the time of the Passover,<sup>75</sup> immediately places Jesus’ words within the context of the redemption of Israel from slavery in Egypt. Similarly, Jesus’ mention of the covenant in blood focuses attention on the initial covenant formed between Israel and God, which was sealed with the blood of sacrificed oxen (Ex 24:8). These events are central to Israel’s story of relationship with God and his faithfulness in redeeming them from slavery. Luke’s reference to the ‘new covenant’ is a further link with Jeremiah’s prophecy of the coming of a new covenant with Israel,

---

<sup>73</sup> The Passover occurred before the institution of the cultic sacrificial system and the sacrifice of the lamb for the Passover meal bears none of the hallmarks of a sacrifice within the sacrificial system as it was later prescribed. See Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 161.

<sup>74</sup> Scot McKnight, *Jesus and His Death : Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2005), 285.

<sup>75</sup> This is the case in the Synoptic Gospels, however in John’s Gospel the Last Supper is held before the Passover and John’s account of events is typically different, focusing on the actions of Jesus in washing his disciple’s feet. Nevertheless, John still records the impending Passover, placing the events that will follow in his narrative within that theological context.

a time when God will write his laws on people's hearts (Jer 31:31-34). Seen within these contexts, Jesus' words indicate that he "understands himself to be the one through whom God intends to fulfill the prophecies of return, renewal, and restoration for his people Israel."<sup>76</sup> This is, importantly, in full continuity with his life, where he sought to save and restore the lost, the sick and the outcast, proclaiming the coming kingdom of God.

Matthew's inclusion of the phrase 'for the forgiveness of sins' may at first reading seem contextually out of place, since the Passover concerned freedom from captivity and the Covenant involved primarily God and the people promising faithfulness to each other. But reference to 'forgiveness of sins' together with 'blood' need not draw us back to the concept of animals being sacrificed in order to secure forgiveness. Rather, we should note that during his ministry, Jesus regularly forgave peoples' sin, purely from his own authority and with no reference to the cultic sacrificial practices. Arguably, this was one aspect of his apparent disregard for the Temple and cult that led to his arrest and execution. Further, as has been argued by Wright in his analysis of the prophets during Israel's time of exile, namely Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, Israel understood her exile as a punishment for her sin: conversely, to be forgiven of her sins would mean being freed from captivity and redeemed from exile.<sup>77</sup> Thus for Jesus to announce forgiveness of sins further identifies himself with the new covenant and the redemption of God's people. In the same way as Jesus' healings were demonstrations of salvation and the in-breaking of God's kingdom, so Jesus saw his death and resurrection as the fulfillment of this mission to establish a new covenant for all nations.

### 2.3.2.2 Other New Testament Images

While Jesus, as we have seen, seemed to have little to say to explicate the meaning of his impending death, the New Testament writers have utilized a wide range of language to speak of that which finally escapes our full comprehension. Perhaps the fact that Jesus gave so little explanation is one of the reasons the New Testament writers search for different ways to express the insights they gained regarding Jesus' death. And yet, clearly, there is not a single concise explanation for all that is encompassed in the death

---

<sup>76</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 166.

<sup>77</sup> For Wright's discussion, see Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 268-74.

and resurrection, and so we find multiple images running through the New Testament. And as we have noted earlier, the writers at times use metaphors to explain the saving significance of Jesus' death: metaphors that their early readers would have clearly understood. As readers in a different cultural context completely, we are wise to seek to understand those metaphors in their original context, and to discern where an image is metaphorical rather than literal in nature.

There are six main images represented within the New Testament.<sup>78</sup> What follows is not a strict classification of these images; rather, it is one way of presenting the breadth of ideas available to the authors to try and explain the complexity they faced in explaining Jesus' accomplishment on the cross. Neither are we attempting here to represent all the various New Testament texts; instead this overview is intended as a sampling of the representative materials.

#### **2.3.2.2.1 *Redemption***

The redemption image comes from the world of commerce, where items are purchased for a price, and yet readers familiar with the Old Testament narrative will immediately associate with the parallel theme of ransom, and also place these ideas within the salvation history of Israel's journey in and out of captivity and slavery. So the image is already one with multiple layers of meaning. In writing to the Corinthians, Paul uses the image as a metaphor: "For you were bought with a price..." (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). In doing so, he seems to err towards the economic dimension of redemption, for as we have already noted, the redemption of Israel was always on account of God's faithful covenanting and not because of a price paid by Israel.

#### **2.3.2.2.2 *Sacrifice***

Sacrificial ideas are common, not just in the letter to the Hebrews where sacrifice is the major theme, but also in Paul's epistles. Sacrificial imagery is arguably the most difficult for modern Christian readers to comprehend, partly because of the lack of clarity

---

<sup>78</sup> Here we are following categories suggested by Green and by Finlan. Green's suggestion is that the multiplicity of images in the New Testament "congregate around five spheres of public life in antiquity: the court of law (e.g., justification), the world of commerce (e.g., redemption), personal relationships (e.g., reconciliation), worship (e.g., sacrifice), and the battleground (e.g., triumph over evil). Green, "Kaleidoscopic View," 166. Finlan follows a similar pattern, but suggests as metaphors for the saving transaction of Jesus death: sacrifice, redemption, martyrdom and the curse transmission ritual, while reconciliation, justification and adoption are models that speak of the results of the saving transaction. Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 5-6.

around Hebrew cultic sacrificial practices, but also because in the New Testament images of sacrifice are superimposed in ways that blur the origins and meaning of the practices even further. As Finlan points out, "...it must be said that sacrifice does not easily yield up its underlying logic. For that very reason, Paul interprets sacrifice with the help of other categories: heroic death, expulsion ritual, judicial penalty."<sup>79</sup>

In the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is presented both as a high priest who will mediate the new covenant prophesied by Jeremiah (Heb 8:1-9), and also as a "single sacrifice for sins" (Heb 10:12). It is noteworthy that the writer immediately identifies this sacrificial act "for sins" with Jeremiah's prophecy of the new covenant, indicating in this instance that the primary function of Jesus' death is the covenantal relationship with God.

In 1 Corinthians 5:7b, Paul uses the image of Jesus as the Passover lamb: "For our Pascal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed." In doing so, Paul is appropriating an image of Jesus that Jesus had perhaps implied during the Last Supper. Though Jesus himself never spoke of himself in this way, John is recorded as saying "Behold, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (Jn 1:29), arguably also a reference to the Passover lamb. Nevertheless, as has been discussed, we should take care not to conflate ideas of the Passover lamb with lambs sacrificed on the cultic altars, as these were different events.

Finlan argues that in 2 Corinthians 5:21 we have an example of the sacrificial metaphor being extended to include the Levitical scapegoat: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin..." In this passage, Jesus is presented not as the sacrificial goat, but as the goat that has the sins of the people transmitted to it, in order to then carry them away into the desert.<sup>80</sup> Finlan also suggests that phrases such as "...who gave himself for our sins to set us free..." (Gal 1:4)<sup>81</sup> are representative of a presentation of Jesus' death as a martyrdom or "noble death": "a death that rescues others or rescues a whole community."<sup>82</sup> Such passages follow a "dying formula" that was common in Hellenistic

---

<sup>79</sup> Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 178.

<sup>80</sup> For discussion of "Expulsion Imagery" in Paul, including 2 Cor 5:21; Gal 3:13; Rom 6:6; 7:4; 8:3, see Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 50-52.

<sup>81</sup> See also 1 Cor 15:3; Rom 5:6,8; 1 Pet 3:18; 1 Thess 5:10)

<sup>82</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 56. Hengel also discusses the pattern of Greek sacrifice of an individual that was "for the good of the community (and) was also often understood as an *expiatory sacrifice* to assuage the anger of the gods." Hengel contends that these ancient Hellenistic ideas had a strong

thought but was also known in the martyrdom stories of Second and Fourth Maccabees. We will discuss further the idea of dying on behalf of someone else in a later section.

Romans 3:25 is a particularly complex verse that we include in this discussion, as a further element of the sacrificial metaphor, as arguably it can be translated "...whom God put forth as a sacrifice of atonement..." The verse begins with "the surrender formula" with, in this case, God as the active subject,<sup>83</sup> and continues with use of the expression *hilasterion*, which is variously translated in English into propitiation (ESV, NASB, KJB), expiation (RSV), sacrifice for sin (NLT) or sacrifice of atonement (NIV, NRSV). As we will shortly argue, this may be better translated as 'place of atonement,' though most current English translations miss this opportunity and keep Rom 3:25 within the overtly sacrificial paradigm.

#### 2.3.2.2.3 *Reconciliation*

Although the image of reconciliation is not common in the New Testament, Baker and Green contend that "...as a conceptual umbrella it has wide currency among the New Testament writings,"<sup>84</sup> an example being Romans 5:10: "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." Reconciliation concerns the sphere of relationships, including all human relationships and importantly the human-God relationship. Jesus' death secures the reconciliation of humanity with God, and so Paul states that reconciliation is the work of God (Col 1:22) who also works to reconcile people to each other (Eph 2:16). However, Paul also points out the responsibility of people to be reconciled to each other and to God: there is an active response needed in response to having first been reconciled (1 Cor 7:11; 2 Cor 5:20).

#### 2.3.2.2.4 *Justification*

The image of justification takes its place within a judicial framework and is extensively used within the New Testament.<sup>85</sup> Justification is gained through faith in Jesus Christ

---

influence on Hebrew Old Testament thought and are also subsequently represented in the dying formula used concerning Jesus' death. See Hengel, *The Atonement*, 19-32.

<sup>83</sup> For discussion of the possible origins of the "surrender formula," including Gen 22:12; Isa 43:3 and Isa 53, see Hengel, *The Atonement*, 35-36.

<sup>84</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 133.

<sup>85</sup> See Rom 3:24, 28; Rom 5:1; Rom 8:30; Rom 10:10; 1 Cor 6:11; Gal 2:16-17; Gal 3:11, 24; Tit 3:7.

and by the free grace of God, whereby God the judge acquits the believer of their sin. Finlan suggests that justification is such a significant image for Paul because of the “deeply ingrained Pharisaic notion of an afterlife lawcourt. Judgment Day is a compelling metaphor for Paul, where both God’s justice and mercy can be highlighted.”<sup>86</sup> Finlan discusses whether Paul’s concept of justification is primarily acquittal, even though the person remains essentially sinful, or alternatively whether the justified believer is actually “*made good*.”<sup>87</sup> He concludes that both elements are present in Paul’s writing: that ‘acquittal’ is more appropriate for the outcome of Judgment, whereas it is also true that “we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). Finlan concludes, “The notion of being merely *deemed* righteous while remaining loathsome is a distortion of Paul’s teaching. It magnifies one aspect of Paul’s doctrine out of proportion while overlooking his teaching about God’s transformative *involvement* with the believer.”<sup>88</sup>

#### 2.3.2.2.5 Adoption

The metaphor of adoption carries a legal tone to it, but within a framework of relational family inclusion. By adoption, the believer has their legal status changed to become part of the family of God.<sup>89</sup> Paul links the concept of adoption to inclusion in the covenant community of Israel, becoming part of the promises of God.<sup>90</sup>

#### 2.3.2.2.6 Triumph over Evil

Jesus is also portrayed as having, by his death, won the battle over evil and the evil powers that are present in the world. Further than this though, Jesus’ victory is even over death (Rom 6:9), the power of sin as the cause of death (Col 2:15; 1 Cor 15:24-25) and even over the one who holds the power of death (Heb 2:14). In this metaphor, the cosmos is a battleground where the forces of evil take every opportunity to fashion sin, alienation and death in the place of righteousness, connection and life. Jesus decisively wins this battle through his resurrection from death, so that sin no longer holds power over those who believe.

---

<sup>86</sup> Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 158.

<sup>87</sup> Here Finlan leans on the argument of Goodspeed. Edgar J. Goodspeed, “Some Greek Notes,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954): 87., cited in Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 159.

<sup>88</sup> Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 160.

<sup>89</sup> Rom 8:15, 23; Eph 1:5; Gal 4:5.

<sup>90</sup> Rom 9:4

### 2.3.2.2.7 *The Complexity of Mixed-Metaphors*

We have seen from this brief survey that there is an extensive range of metaphors employed by the writers of the New Testament to express the meaning found in Jesus' death. That there are so many different metaphors is testament to the complexity inherent in understanding that event that Paul described as a 'scandal' (Gal 5:11). No one metaphor can hope to express all that was achieved by Jesus on the cross and to rely on one metaphor or concept alone would risk losing other important truths. Baker and Green also suggest that, "A second reason for this plurality is pastoral... If people are lost, they need to be found. If they are oppressed by hostile powers, they need to be delivered. If they exist in a state of enmity, they need to be reconciled. And so on."<sup>91</sup>

It is also important to note that often the New Testament texts merge two or more metaphors together within the same sentence or two. A few examples are included to illustrate:

Romans 3:24-25 "...they are now *justified* by his grace as a gift, through the *redemption* that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a *sacrifice* of atonement by his *blood* effective through faith." In this single sentence Paul manages to combine the images of justification in the court of law, redemption or purchase in the market place that also has overlays of meaning from the ransom/redemption of Israel from slavery, and the cultic practices of sacrifice involving the shedding of blood. This verse is even more complex due to the potential meanings of *hilasterion*, here translated 'sacrifice of atonement.'

Gal 3:11;13 "Now it is evident that no one is *justified* before God by the law, for 'The one who is righteous will live by faith.'...Christ *redeemed* us from the curse of the law by *becoming a curse* for us..." In these two verses, Paul combines the metaphors of

---

<sup>91</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 124. Green expands further: "We should not imagine that the variety of New Testament images of atonement is simply a function of the different writers of its books. Paul himself can write of substitution, representation, sacrifice, justification, forgiveness, reconciliation, triumph over powers, redemption and more. John can speak of illumination as well as sacrifice. Although in Hebrews the notion of sacrifice is paramount, Jesus is presented as both the perfect high priest and the perfect sacrificial victim. First Peter speaks of Jesus' death as a ransom and sacrifice, while the book of Revelation presents Jesus' death in terms of military triumph and redemption. This variety might appropriately lead us to the conclusion that the significance of Jesus' death could not be represented without remainder by any one concept or theory or metaphor. This is due first to the universal profundity of Jesus' death as saving event, to the variety of contexts within which Jesus' death required explication and to the variety of ways in which the human situation can be understood." Green, "Kaleidoscopic View," 167.



justification and redemption, even though he is dealing with the one issue of the law. He further adds a phrase that bears resemblance to the scapegoating mechanism of transferring sin to the goat that takes on the sins of the people.

1 Pet 1:18-19 “You know that you were *ransomed* from the futile ways inherited from your ancestors, not with perishable things like silver or gold, but with the precious *blood* of Christ, like that of a *lamb* without defect or blemish.” In these two verses, Peter combines images of Israel’s ransom with various sacrificial concepts, possibly the Passover lamb with its links with Israel’s redemption history and also possibly the blood sacrifices of the cult. In terms of the outcome that Peter alludes to, Baker and Green comment, “Peter makes clear that believers are liberated not, say, from divine wrath, but from ‘the emptiness of your inherited way of life’ (1 Pet 1:18).”<sup>92</sup>

### 2.3.2.3 Important Matters of Interpretation

We turn now to consider three matters of particular significance when considering the language of the New Testament and the atonement theologies that are starting to take place there in the formulations of these earliest Christian writers. Firstly, we will look more closely at the term ‘hilasterion’ as used in Romans 3:25, then we will consider the question of the New Testament writers’ understanding of substitution and the ways in which Jesus was a substitute for those he died “for,” and then finally we will consider to what extent Paul considered the death of Jesus to be a transaction.

#### 2.3.2.3.1 *The Hilasterion*

In Romans 3:25a we read, “Whom God set forth as *hilasterion* through faith in his blood.” As has been mentioned several times above, this verse is a particularly interesting one due to the presence of the Greek term *hilasterion*. The origins of the term, together with the possible translations it generates, have been the source of a great deal of scholarly debate over the last one hundred years in particular, and divergence of opinion is still the rule rather than the exception. The term, and its meaning, are of central importance because of the theological impact each has on the understanding of Christ’s death, the nature of God and his role in that event. In the case of a translation as “propitiation” (ESV, NASB, KJB), Jesus’ death is seen as appeasing the wrath of

---

<sup>92</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 108.

God, raising images of God as judging, punishing and in need of satisfaction. Where “expiation” is used (RSV), the focus is less on God’s need and more on the human need to have sin removed or cleansed because it creates separation from God. Those translations that employ “sacrifice of atonement” or similar (NIV, NRSV) lead the reader to a focus on sacrifice, where Jesus is presented as the sacrifice, again raising questions about the nature of God in requiring sacrifice to the extent of sacrificing his son.

*Hilasterion* is the Greek translation of the Hebrew *kapporet*, which described the covering over the Ark of the Covenant in Exodus 25. In English, *kapporet* is usually translated as “mercy seat” because it was the place where God said that he would meet with Moses (Ex 25:22). However, as Koch explains, the translation of *kapporet* into Greek faced the difficulty of translation from one language to another, where not only did the translators face difficulties of translating languages with entirely different structures, they were also trying to bridge between two cultures with different worldviews, different theistic understanding and different metaphysical foundations.<sup>93</sup> The Hebrew *kapporet*, used to describe the cover over the ark, derives from the root *kpr* meaning “to cover,” but as the term *kipper* is also derived from *kpr*, the meaning of *kapporet* could tend towards “the place where atonement is made.” Koch suggests that this uncertainty could be behind the choice of the translators of the Septuagint in the third century B.C.E. Rather than translate *kapporet* with one Greek word as was the custom, the translators chose two: “*epithema hilasterion*,” where *epithema* was the noun meaning “lid” or “cover” and *hilasterion* an adjective with the meaning of propitiation of a deity.<sup>94</sup> In subsequent passages, the translators went on to use *hilasterion* by itself, in effect raising it to an independent noun.

Koch discusses why the translators may have chosen *hilasterion* when propitiation is not the intent of the Hebrew *kapporet*, which had the meaning simply to cover (*kpr*) or to cleanse (*kipper*). He suggests that *hilao*- root words may have already been in use in the Greek synagogue community, connected with *katharizo* terms (to cleanse or purge) and so there might have been a cultural leaning towards expressions intended to appease

---

<sup>93</sup> See Koch, “Some Considerations on the Translation of *Kapporet* in the Septuagint,” 66-67.

<sup>94</sup> Koch comments, “In the new combination, *epithema* has the leading position syntactically. It is an independent noun, ‘lid, cover’, whereas *hilasterion* functions as an attributive adjective ‘propitiatory’, signifying the cultic relevance of that part of the ark.” Ibid., 67.

God.<sup>95</sup> For example, the term ‘be *bileos*’ was a common expression offered to pagan Greek gods, hoping to turn them from anger towards looking kindly on the person. Koch comments “With the pagan term *bilao*- a non-Hebrew concept of a necessary pacification of God by human endeavors enters the text.”<sup>96</sup> He argues, however, that the intent of the Hebrew text is not propitiation, and that through the introduction of this Greek term a function of propitiation has been attributed to the ‘*kapporet*’ that was not intended: “The idea could scarcely have arisen from a strict reading of the Hebrew text because there the intention of *kipper* is not to propitiate the deity but rather to cleanse the holy place and the members of the community with the help of God’s gracious support.”<sup>97</sup> Significant debates over the use and intent of *hilasterion* have taken place over the last eighty years, with C.H.Dodd initially arguing that *hilasterion* as used in the Septuagint had different roots than *hilasterion* in pagan literature. As a result, for Dodd, the meaning in the Septuagint related to cleansing rather than the pagan source meaning of propitiation.<sup>98</sup> In response, Morris argued that there was in fact biblical Greek as well as pagan precedent for understanding the propitiatory nature of *hilasterion*, and that in the context of Romans 1-3, propitiation is the correct understanding of the term.<sup>99</sup> While the complexities of both Hebrew and Greek language, and the mechanisms for transmission between them present seemingly unending scope for academic debate, it seems that as a starting point we would do well to be cognizant of Koch’s findings concerning the impact of pagan Greek culture on the Hebrew perspective on God. He concludes, “The use of the root *hilaskesthai* opens the door to an increasingly Hellenistic understanding of human sin and divine forgiveness. As a result, in the later parts of the Greek Bible, God becomes the direct object of *hilaskesthai*, and the meaning moves increasingly towards the placation of the angry God.”<sup>100</sup>

With this background in mind, we return to consideration of the best meaning for *hilasterion* in Rom 3:25. In the first instance, we note that *hilasterion* is a noun used for

---

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 68. Koch gives a further example in discussing Ex 32:12: “Moses’ request ‘be *bileos*’ is accompanied by the explanation ‘make an end to your fierce wrath’ in Exod 32:12; its effect is summarized with the statement, ‘And the Lord was propitiated (*bilasthe*) concerning the evils that he had said to bring on his people’ (v.14). The Hebrew original had stated that ‘YHWH had changed his mind’ (*wayyinahem*). The translator avoids the anthropomorphic attitude. But he also transfers God from the subject of an action to its subject.” Ibid., 69.

<sup>98</sup> See C. H. Dodd, *The Bible and the Greeks* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935).

<sup>99</sup> See Morris, *The Atonement, Its Meaning and Significance*.

<sup>100</sup> Koch, “Some Considerations on the Translation of *Kapporet* in the Septuagint,” 75.

the place where atonement takes place. It does not ever denote the sacrificial animal offered.<sup>101</sup> Because of this, those translations that render “sacrifice of atonement” or “atoning sacrifice” in Rom 3:25 substantially miss the mark. It is true that in other places Paul speaks of Jesus as a sacrifice, but that is certainly not true in this passage, notwithstanding the obvious reference to blood. The academic debate for most of the last century has focused on distinguishing between “propitiation” and “expiation.” Gundry-Volf summarises the main arguments and concludes that “not ‘propitiatory’ but ‘expiatory’ is the more appropriate description of Christ’s atoning death as a *hilasterion*...”<sup>102</sup> Arguably however, although propitiation and expiation are semantically different terms, the use of one almost inevitably implies elements of the other: if God needs to be propitiated, then this is achieved primarily through the expiation of the sin; whereas if the initial need is expiation, the removal of the sin, then surely the question in the background is why the sin must be removed, with the obvious answer being God’s anger towards that sin.<sup>103</sup> The entwined nature of the two terms leads us to wonder whether the debate around the two has been somewhat of an academic red herring, obscuring a more direct reading of the text.<sup>104</sup>

The *kapporet* was of course the covering over the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>105</sup> It was the place where God was present, in the ‘Holy of Holies’ in the Temple, it was where God spoke to the people through the priest, and it was the place where God dealt with the sins of the people, cleansing the sanctuary and the people from their uncleanness.<sup>106</sup> So when

---

<sup>101</sup> See Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 40-41. In 1 John 2:2 we read that Jesus is the “atoning sacrifice”: but here the Greek is *hilasmos*.

<sup>102</sup> Gundry-Volf’s reasons are as follows: “(1) expiation clearly fits the Pauline understanding of that death as God’s own gracious initiative in love toward the ungodly...as well as God’s judgment against sin, (2) the idea of the appeasing of a wrathful God is in tension with Paul’s understanding of Christ’s death, (3) the context of Romans 3:25 does not require propitiation, and (4) the usage of the *hilask-* word group in the LXX suggests a development of meaning toward the connotations of expiation.” Gundry-Volf, “Expiation, Propitiation, Mercy Seat,” 282.

<sup>103</sup> Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul’s Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 135-36. In discussing the two terms, Finlan concludes that they “describe two aspects of the same cultic transaction.”

<sup>104</sup> Belousek wisely states that his purpose is not to find an English word to translate *hilasterion*, so much as to find the best understanding of the term’s usage in the Pentateuch in order to interpret its significance in Romans. Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 255.

<sup>105</sup> Belousek comments that in twenty-one of twenty-seven Septuagint uses of *hilasterion*, it refers to the “mercy seat” and not to sacrificial victim or altar or sacrifice. In the six contested cases, all in the prophets, the *hilasterion* refers to an altar rather than the ark cover, but in all these cases the reference is clearly to an inanimate object. The only other use of *hilasterion* in the New Testament, other than Romans 3:25 is in Hebrews 9:5 where the intended use is clearly to refer to the “mercy seat.” Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> For this discussion, see *ibid.*, 256-57. Belousek also cites a number of other scholars who agree with his conclusions, including: John Driver, *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church* (Scottsdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1986), 147-55.; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans : A New Translation with*

Paul says that God has put forward Jesus as *hilasterion*, he is saying that Jesus is the new place where God is present, speaking to the people, and the place where God cleanses the people from their sin, maintaining covenant relationship because of his goodness. Brondos points out also, that it is not the event of the cross that is this *hilasterion*: Jesus himself is the place where God is present, speaking and cleansing, through his incarnation, whole life, death and resurrection.<sup>107</sup> Finlan agrees with this conclusion and notes that because the only occasion on which the *hilasterion* was associated with sacrifice was the annual Day of Atonement ritual where the sacrifice was for the cleansing of the Temple. He considers which temple might be purified through Christ's death, and concludes that the best suggestion is the whole human race.<sup>108</sup> This conclusion fits with the trajectory of Israel's story: God covenants with the Hebrew people, but they are to become a light to the nations so that all people will eventually be included in the covenant. With Jesus' life-ministry-death, the door is opened for all people to have access to the "mercy seat" of God's presence, revelation and cleansing.

The last part of Romans 3:25a provides a further challenge to translators. As Finlan comments, the two prepositional phrases, "through faith" and "in his blood" "always seem to be searching for, but never finding, a home, at least in the world of scholarship."<sup>109</sup> For translations that choose "propitiation" or "expiation," there is a sacrificial cultic logic in the "blood" expression, though questions abound as to what faith in blood might mean and whether the faith is Christ's or ours. That "blood" might also stand for "death" raises further questions. Though there is lack of space here to consider this debate, Finlan's suggested translation, "whom God put forward in a bloody death as a mercy seat of faith," seems to be a straight-forward rendition of the Greek that avoids a cultic blood-sacrificial interpretation of Jesus' death and opens the door to the theologically intriguing notion of Jesus as the "mercy seat."<sup>110</sup>

---

*Introduction and Commentary* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 349-50.; Hengel, *The Atonement : The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*, 60-64.

<sup>107</sup> See David A. Brondos, *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle's Story of Redemption* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 128.

<sup>108</sup> Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 143-44. Finlan notes that Paul is speaking in this passage about the state of the whole human race (Rom 3:12; 19; 23) and so the metaphor of Christ as "mercy seat" most logically applies to the subject of the passage: humanity.)

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 146.

As we come to consider various theories of atonement, we must keep alert to the various theories' approach to the translation of *hilasterion*, being aware of the risk of reading backwards and applying meaning to the "mercy seat" that may not be there.

#### 2.3.2.3.2 "For us" – the Question of Substitution

"Christ died for us" is a simple expression, used a number of times in the New Testament,<sup>111</sup> that begs further explanation of what "for us" might mean. In a similar way, the Fourth Servant Song says, "But he was wounded for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities...and the Lord has laid on him the punishment of us all" (Isa 53:5a, 6b). These types of expression lead some to believe that Jesus died as a substitute for "us" so that "we" do not have to suffer that same death.

As we have seen, the various New Testament metaphors provide a number of different ways to think about how this substitution might work; for example, redemption being a substitute involving some kind of payment or economic substitution. Finlan discusses the various potential meanings of "for us" and links these expressions with various models of the atonement:

he died to save us (martyr model)  
or: he died in our place (penal substitution model) –  
or: he paid the price to buy our freedom (ransoming model) –  
or: he died as the new place of atonement (sacrificial and typological) –  
or: he took on our curse and bore away our sins (scapegoat, also typological).<sup>112</sup>

Clearly, the way "for us" is understood is likely to have a significant impact on the subsequent understanding of the atonement.

The Greek word that is translated "for" is *hyper*, and just as the English "for" has a range of potential meanings, so debate has swirled around the meaning of *hyper*. Whereas the Greek *anti* would usually have the sense of substitution or "this for that," *hyper* is used instead of *anti* in most cases of Jesus' death "for us." Some scholars understand *hyper* as primarily meaning substitution while others regard *hyper* as primarily having different meanings to substitution.<sup>113</sup> Belousek suggests that *hyper* may be read as substitution (in

---

<sup>111</sup> Rom 5:6, 8; 8:34; 1 Cor 15:3; 2 Cor 5:14.

<sup>112</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 58.

<sup>113</sup> For a discussion of some of the background to the debate regarding use and meaning of *hyper*, see Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 266-74.

place of), benefaction (for the sake of) or representation (on behalf of). He distinguishes between substitution and representation, as well as an intermediate category of ‘representative substitution’ on the basis of whether the one substituted *for* is included or excluded by the action of the one doing the substituting. Belousek summarises his findings thus:

Substitution: other-exclusive, self-benefiting action (‘in place of’)

Representative substitution: other-exclusive, other-benefiting action (‘in place of’ and ‘on behalf of’)

Representation: other-inclusive, other-benefiting action (‘on behalf of’)<sup>114</sup>

Belousek goes on to discuss Paul’s use of *hyper* in 2 Cor 5:14, and concludes that Paul’s intended use must be ‘representation’ rather than ‘substitution.’<sup>115</sup> Hofius also discusses a number of New Testament usages of *hyper* but does so in light of a reading of the Fourth Servant Song. He argues that while the Servant Song is clearly a case of substitution, or exclusive place-taking, the New Testament writers took this text and applied it to Jesus in a completely new way as inclusive place-taking.<sup>116</sup> Hofius’ starting point is that the exclusive place-taking portrayed in Isaiah 53 is outrageous and unexpected. He asks whether it is theologically possible for God to transfer the guilt of one person onto another, and in response discusses Ezekiel 18:20 and Exodus 32:32-33. His conclusion is that these two texts “exclude the possibility of an innocent person joining in the punishment with the guilty party – how much more unlikely an innocent person substituting for a guilty person.”<sup>117</sup>

In considering a range of New Testament texts that have as their source, either implicitly or explicitly, Isaiah 53, Hofius argues that the writers have taken the ideas of the Servant’s suffering, but in applying these ideas Christologically have changed

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 279. Note that Belousek first distinguishes between substitution and exchange, where substitution is a sub-category, or specific kind of exchange. Ibid., 274.

<sup>115</sup> For Belousek’s discussion of 2 Cor 5:14-15 see *ibid.*, 281-87. He contends, “Reading *hyper* in 2 Cor 5:14 with the sense of substitution would render senseless what Paul literally says: if Christ died instead of all, then Christ and only Christ died, but Paul says, ‘all died.’” *ibid.*, 282.

<sup>116</sup> See Otfried Hofius, “The Fourth Servant Song in the New Testament Letters,” in *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004), 164-72.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 169. In Exodus 32:30-34 Moses intercedes for the people and asks God to also “blot me out of the book you have written” if God will not forgive the people. God’s reply is to refuse Moses’ request; in other words, Moses is not even allowed to take a place with the people, and certainly not to substitute for them. In Ezekiel 18:20, God states clearly “The person who sins shall die...the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own,” thereby precluding one person taking the place of another.

perspectives to see the Christ event as “*inclusive* place-taking,” that “is not human but *divine* place-taking...The Christological and soteriological statements that speak of inclusive, *divine* place-taking in *this* sense are the decisive ones in the New Testament.”<sup>118</sup>

If we are to take this recognition of inclusive place-taking seriously as we come to consider various theories of atonement, we must recognize that any theory of atonement that suggests Christ as a substitute who takes people’s place in an exclusive way, does not do justice to the significance of inclusive place-taking to be found in the New Testament. As Hofius puts it, “Christ takes the place of sinners in such a way that he does not displace them (as in the substitutionary model) but rather encompasses them as *persons* and affects them in their being.”<sup>119</sup>

#### 2.3.2.3.3 *The Transaction Question*

Our third and final issue for consideration is a matter raised by Finlan, concerning the extent to which Paul represents the death of Jesus as a transaction that in some manner creates a change in God. In places, Paul portrays salvation as being the free gift of God, given because of God’s loving grace towards people. At other times, Paul’s language of justification evokes the law court where a penalty must be paid, or he speaks of redemption involving a purchase price needing to be paid, or of course he uses the language of sacrifice. In all these cases, God’s gracious acceptance appears dependent on humans needing to *do* something in order to garner God’s favour. In Finlan’s terminology, a transaction is required to either change God’s intention toward us or secure his favour.<sup>120</sup> At times, Paul combines these polarities, for example in Romans 3:24 “they are justified by his grace as a gift,” sounds like the justification is purely on the basis of God’s goodness. And yet, Paul continues, “...through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus...” where the introduction of the redemption metaphor takes the reader to the idea of a payment being needed. We may be led to wonder whether salvation is something that Paul sees as achievable only after a price has been paid, a ritual performed, a trial endured or adoption papers legally signed by the appropriate authorities. As Finlan puts it, “All these statements seem to imply that God is paid-off or

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 175. (Emphasis in original). Hofius discusses 2 Corinthians 5:14-21 at length but also sees inclusive place-taking in Rom 3:22b-26; 5:6-10; 7:4-6; 8:3-4; 1 Cor 1:30; Gal 2:19-20.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 173.

<sup>120</sup> For this discussion, see Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 58-62. Also: Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul’s Cultic Atonement Metaphors*, 58-59.



persuaded, though Paul will not say this openly...the metaphors imply a selfless Messiah, but a God who must be paid-off. Salvation is not free. Paul's various metaphors imply a *transaction* by which salvation is 'bought with a price' (1 Cor 6:20)."<sup>121</sup> As a further example of Paul's complexity, consider Romans 5:8-9: verse 8 clearly states God's initiating love which operates independent of any good behavior, offering or payment: "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." And yet again, Paul goes on to write, "Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood will we be saved through him from the wrath of God," a sentence replete with images of the law court, sacrificial blood and a wrathful God who perhaps needs placating. It seems unclear at times whether Paul thinks that salvation is a result of God's grace or whether it is only available from God after some transaction satisfies God, and, by implication, changes his mind.

Finlan is sensitive to what is undeniably present in Paul's writing, and yet also acknowledges that Paul was using contemporary metaphors to explain in a variety of ways the mystery of Christ's death. He concludes that while Paul's metaphors incline towards presenting God as needing persuasion, his broader theological programme clearly presents God as gracious, extending his love without any need for persuasion. Finlan contends that in places, Paul's presentation is similar to the message Jesus preached: God's love is freely available to all. At other times, Paul's reliance on the cultic and legal-based metaphors from his own cultural background can, if read unwisely, present God as requiring payment in order to gain approval or avert his wrath. In Finlan's words:

Despite the worthy motives of Paul's spiritualizing project, we must recognize that his rhetorical use of substitutionary metaphors ended up perpetuating certain primitive concepts of God that Paul himself could see through, as is shown by his insistence that God was not persuaded but *initiated* salvation (Rom 5:8). Paul was willing to use soteriological formulas that embodied propitiation and persuasion because they 'worked' with the people... But this means that some incompatible religious ideas were yoked together.<sup>122</sup>

Finlan appropriately warns us against taking New Testament metaphorical language too literally, or forcing rigid doctrine onto fluid metaphors. Although Paul used language that embodied concepts of payment and satisfaction, these concepts do not necessarily

---

<sup>121</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 59.

<sup>122</sup> *ibid.*, 61-62. (Emphasis in original).

reflect the character of God. His warning is to be aware of later appropriations of Paul's metaphors that take these concepts and turn them into dogma to the exclusion of other concepts or ideas about God. While Paul does not develop a theology of God being appeased by Jesus' death, such ideas may be seen in his metaphors, and it is clear that these concepts have later been developed into presentations of Jesus bearing a substitutionary punishment. However, Finlan defends Paul, saying, "Paul cannot be blamed for the very literal-minded and morbid theologies that lesser minds have developed, but we also cannot deny that these theologies grew out of the Pauline tradition."<sup>123</sup>

And so we turn now to consider some of the theories that have been put forward to explain the meaning, function and working of the cross, but forewarned against some of the pitfalls that lie in approaching the subject. Whereas some long-established doctrines of the church now raise little by way of contention, atonement theories continue to be the source of strong and at times strident debate. Finlan's perceptive comment regarding atonement metaphors is true and should make us more wary of our own responses to atonement language. He writes of atonement metaphors: "...they carry their baggage with them, and leave these bags like time bombs in the railway stations of our thinking, prepared to explode into manifestations of fear, suspicion and scapegoating."<sup>124</sup>

## **2.4 ATONEMENT THEORIES**

### **2.4.1 INTRODUCTION**

We turn in this final section to consider some of the main theories or models of the atonement that have been proposed throughout the course of church history. As has been previously noted, theories of the atonement remain as such: none were written into church doctrine in the early centuries of the church, and none are represented in documents such as the early Creeds. Despite, or perhaps because of, the rich diversity of metaphors in the New Testament together with the broader biblical narrative, the church has not settled on a single doctrine of the atonement. At various times one theory has emerged as the most dominant, but as time has passed and cultural change has

---

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

occurred, so has the theory that has held the most adherents. It is even difficult to specify a list of the various theories as different theologians and texts categorise the theories in different ways.<sup>125</sup> While many theologians restrict their discussion of the various theories to only four or five, Schmiechen breaks from the usual pattern and in his extensive work suggests at least ten theories under four general headings. He proposes the following typology: (1) Christ Died for Us: i) Sacrifice ii) Justification by Grace iii) Penal Substitution. (2) Liberation from Sin, Death, and Demonic Powers. (3) The Purposes of God: i) The Renewal of Creation ii) The Restoration of Creation iii) Christ the Goal of Creation. (4) Reconciliation: i) Christ the Way to the Knowledge of God ii) Christ the Reconciler iii) The Wondrous Love of God.<sup>126</sup> Schmiechen's work is significant due to the depth of the work, reference to a very wide range of scholarship and the novel structure he proposes. However, in what follows we will consider the range of theories within a more restrictive framework that represents a composite from a variety of contemporary theological sources.<sup>127</sup>

## 2.4.2 CHRISTUS VICTOR

The first theory to consider has typically been referred to as "Christus Victor," since the lectures of Gustav Aulen in 1931, subsequently published as the landmark little book of the same name. Aulen's typology refers to both "subjective" and "objective" theories of atonement, but he argues that the "classic" view, which he also refers to as the "dualistic dramatic" view, is the theory that is most prevalent in the New Testament. Aulen

---

<sup>125</sup> For example, Grudem lists the following theories: Penal Substitution, The Ransom to Satan theory, The Moral Influence theory, The Example theory, The Governmental theory. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 579-82. In the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, Morris lists the theories as follows: The Subjective View or Moral Influence theory, The Atonement as Victory, Anselm's Satisfaction theory, Penal Substitution, Governmental theory. Leon Morris, "Theories of the Atonement," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 100-02. McGrath takes a different approach, listing: The Cross as Sacrifice, The Cross as Victory, The Cross and Forgiveness, The Cross as Moral Example. Alister E. McGrath, *Christian Theology : An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 342-60. Lewis and Demarest discuss as follows: The Classic or Ransom View, The Moral Influence Theory, The Satisfaction or Juridical Theory, The Governmental or Rectoral Theory, Neoorthodox Reconciliation Theory. Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology, Vol. 2*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publ. House, 1990), 372-77.

<sup>126</sup> See Peter Schmiechen, *Saving Power : Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005).

<sup>127</sup> In addition to Grudem, Morris, McGrath and Lewis and Demarest cited in a previous footnote, our approach also includes consideration of the approaches of: Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 66-78., Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds., *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008)., and James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement : Four Views* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006).

argues that in addition, Christus Victor was the predominant idea of the atonement for the first millennium and that although it faded from view during the Middle Ages due to the influence of Anselm's Satisfaction theory, Christus Victor themes continued strongly in church art and devotion. In addition, Aulen argues that Luther considers the Christus Victor motif very favourably, though again this support was overwhelmed by the emergence of Penal Substitutionary ideas. Though there are a number of different perspectives within the Christus Victor motif, the general idea can be expressed as "a Divine conflict and victory; Christ – Christus Victor - fights against and triumphs over the evil powers of the world, the 'tyrants' under which mankind is in bondage and suffering, and in Him God reconciles the world to Himself."<sup>128</sup>

#### 2.4.2.1 Ransom Theory

Ransom theory is most commonly attributed to Gregory of Nyssa (335-395),<sup>129</sup> and has its biblical foundations in the New Testament images of the work of Christ as a ransom, particularly in the "ransom saying" of Jesus in the Gospels. For Gregory, the problem in the world is that Satan has deceived people into believing that vice is good and beautiful, and consequently people have sold themselves to be owned as slaves of Satan. God's solution is to pay a ransom to Satan to ransom his people back into his ownership. God had to do this because it would not be just for him to simply take people back from Satan, even though he could if he so willed. As the ransom, God offers Jesus to Satan in exchange for the rest of humanity. This offer is too good for Satan to refuse, but he is tricked, because on receiving Jesus, he of course finds that he cannot own God. Because Jesus and Satan are opposites, and Jesus is the more powerful, he necessarily drives Satan out, in the same way that introducing light into a dark room drives out darkness. "For if death is just the absence of life, then when life comes to death, death is defeated."<sup>130</sup>

Ransom theories are troubling in the way that they present God as needing to make a payment to Satan, as with the mechanism used of having to use deception to trick Satan

---

<sup>128</sup> Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor : An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1953), 20.

<sup>129</sup> Beilby and Eddy note that embryonic Ransom ideas are present in Irenaeus, and then further developed by Origen, Gregory the Great and Rufinus. Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement*, 13.

<sup>130</sup> Junius Johnson, *Patristic and Medieval Atonement Theory : A Guide to Research* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), 89.

into the exchange. Whilst developing New Testament imagery to explain Christ's death, it appears that Gregory takes the ransom metaphor too far and too literally to create a theological situation that is difficult to say the least. Additionally, to understand the biblical theme of God's ransoming Israel without any payments being made, calls into question the use of the metaphor in such a literal way. Gregory of Nazianzus, a contemporary of Gregory of Nyssa's, was resistant to the notion of God paying a ransom to Satan, and so represented early resistance in the tradition towards development of ransom as a comprehensive metaphor of atonement.

#### 2.4.2.2 Recapitulation

Another commonly recognized approach following the Christus Victor theme is Recapitulation theory, which is traced back to the thinking of Irenaeus (130-220). Ideas of Recapitulation follow Romans 5:15-21, where Christ is presented as the new Adam: "For just as by the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man's obedience the many will be made righteous" (Rom 5: 19). Accordingly, for Irenaeus, "Christ restores each progressive phase of human life by living through it; his obedience in each stage of life repairs the damage done by human sin."<sup>131</sup> One strength of Irenaeus' approach is that he exhibits full continuity between the Incarnation and Atonement. That is, the cross is not the only necessary action in redemption; rather, the whole of Jesus' life and ministry is central to his work. According to Aulen, "It is the Word of God incarnate who overcomes the tyrants which hold man in bondage; God Himself enters into the world of sin and death, that He may reconcile the world to Himself. Therefore Incarnation and Atonement stand in no sort of antithesis; rather, they belong inseparably together."<sup>132</sup>

#### 2.4.2.3 Cosmic Battle

The cosmic battle is perhaps seen as the typical presentation of Christus Victor. That the work of Christ is framed in the context of a battle between the powers of evil and the goodness of God makes sense when we consider that the Christian church of the first few centuries was clearly set within a political, social and religious world where to claim

---

<sup>131</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 67.

<sup>132</sup> Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 50-51.

that Jesus is Lord was to confront head-on the dominant claim of Caesar. Baker and Green suggest that the resultant persecution of the early Christians, together with the cosmology of the day that saw earthly conflict directly related to celestial conflicts, led naturally to understanding the cross within the framework of a battle between Christ and the forces of evil, sin and death: a battle Christ wins through his resurrection.<sup>133</sup>

The use of Christus Victor models seems to have waned over the latter part of the first millennium.<sup>134</sup> Aulen argues that Luther's teaching on the atonement "can only be rightly understood as a revival of the old classic theme of the Atonement as taught by the Fathers, but with a greater depth of treatment."<sup>135</sup> However, regardless of the accuracy of Aulen claim, the Lutheran tradition returned very quickly to appropriation of the Satisfaction theory. In more recent years, a number of contemporary theologians have returned to Christus Victor themes to explore their use, particularly in liberationist and non-violent approaches to the atonement.<sup>136</sup>

## 2.4.3 SATISFACTION THEORY

### 2.4.3.1 Anselm of Canterbury

In this section, the theories represented belong to a group of theories that have been variously categorized as "Latin," "Commercial," and "Objective."<sup>137</sup> The central characteristic of "Objective" theories is that they address a necessary demand of God. In the eleventh century, Anselm of Canterbury was one of the first to propose a theory that is "objective" in that its focus is on satisfying the requirement for honor of a God who is seen as having been dishonored. Honor and satisfaction may seem alien concepts by which to approach the atonement, and in terms of the biblical themes considered so far,

---

<sup>133</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 144.

<sup>134</sup> As mentioned previously, Aulen claims dominance of the classic view for the first thousand years of the church. In contrast, Baker and Green suggest that Christus Victor declined in popularity in the sixth century, post-Constantine, when the conflict between church and state lessened with subsequent changes in conflict and persecution. *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>135</sup> Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 118. Aulen claims that Luther has been largely misinterpreted as adhering to an Anselmian point of view.

<sup>136</sup> See for example, Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers : Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992).; J. Denny Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001).; Darby Kathleen Ray, *Deceiving the Devil : Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom* (Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1998). Beilby and Eddy refer to these modern approaches as "demythologized" approaches to the atonement. Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement*, 14.

<sup>137</sup> See Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement*, 14.

arguably they are. However, Anselm's proposals were set firmly within the medieval feudal system within which he lived, and his theory is perhaps more firmly rooted in his culture than within the biblical narrative.<sup>138</sup>

Anselm's theory uses the medieval honor system at work in his society as a model to explain the work of the cross. For Anselm, the problem in the world is that human sin causes dishonor for God, and the idea that God could let this dishonouring pass without punishment calls into question whether God is in fact just. The offence therefore demands that humans restore God's honor, firstly by restoring what has been lost, and secondly, by paying reparation. Within the feudal system, reparation requirements were based around the degree of offence caused by the one offending and also by the status of the offended. The higher the status of the lord offended, the greater the insult caused by an offence. In Anselm's model, this creates an insurmountable barrier for humans because our sin is so great and God's status is so high that humans cannot hope to satisfy his requirement of restored honor. Therefore God's only option to restore his honor is either to carry out the punishment that people have rightfully incurred, or, to have his honor satisfied through the death of Jesus. As God-man, Jesus is both able to satisfy God and to represent sinful humanity.<sup>139</sup>

Strengths of Anselm's satisfaction theory include that he takes the question of sin seriously, though this is limited to the effects on God and fails to take into account any question of the impact of sin on others in society or the physical world, or sin as seen in systemic failure in society. Anselm also manages to distance his idea from any sense of payment to, or deception of the devil, which has been seen as a positive progression from early ransom formulations. Further, he shows great creativity in using images from his own culture to explain the message of the cross, just as Paul and the other epistle writers did in their own time. On the negative side, Anselm appeals little to scripture and his model is so deeply rooted in the feudal system that it perhaps says more about his culture than about God. As Finlan laments, "It certainly looks like God has the same

---

<sup>138</sup> Green and Baker explain that Anselm's treatise *Cur Deus Homo?* was primarily a rationally argued explanation of the need for Christ's death intended for unbelievers of his time. Consequently his work is not argued from a biblical framework so much as a rational one based on the social structures of his day. Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 154.

<sup>139</sup> See Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement*, 16.

pride and status consciousness that an eleventh-century lord had.”<sup>140</sup> In a similar way, Baker and Green express concern that rather than just borrowing illustrative concepts from his culture, Anselm went too far and “actually allowed medieval concepts of honor to define how God ought to act.”<sup>141</sup> Anselm’s demand for God’s honor to be satisfied also closely follows the religious demands of the time, where indulgences and paying penance were ways for people to escape from the fearful punishments likely to be imposed by God as consequences for sin. As such, Anselm reflected the prevailing culture of fear, servitude and submission, all of which might not have been considered as “good news.”

#### 2.4.3.2 Penal Substitution theory

Anselm’s satisfaction theory laid the groundwork for the development of penal substitutionary theory some five hundred years later.<sup>142</sup> Penal substitution (sometimes referred to as penal satisfaction) combines concepts from two key arenas. Firstly, the idea of substitution being necessary to pay the price required of sinful humanity, and secondly, the juridical framework of a legal system that judges and mandates retributive punishment for wrongdoing. Penal substitution can thus be defined:

The Father, because of his love for human beings, sent his Son (who offered himself willingly and gladly) to satisfy God’s justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners. The punishment and penalty we deserve was laid on Jesus Christ instead of us, so that in the cross both God’s holiness and love are manifested.<sup>143</sup>

In a longer explication of the theory, Grudem explains that human beings have four essential problems as a result of being sinners: we deserve to die as a penalty for sin, we deserve to bear God’s wrath, we are separated from God by our sins and in bondage to sin and the kingdom of Satan. The cross is seen as God’s solution to these problems, and on the cross Jesus bore the sins of humanity, suffered supremely as a consequence, was abandoned by God and bore God’s wrath on himself. He suffered and died in our place, and in doing so propitiated God and removed us from the wrath that we deserve. This

---

<sup>140</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 72.

<sup>141</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 158. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>142</sup> For discussion of the origins of penal substitution in the thinking of Luther and Calvin, see Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 75-78.

<sup>143</sup> Thomas R. Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” in *The Nature of the Atonement : Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006), 67.



was necessary because on our own, sinful humans would never be able to pay a price great enough, because God's righteousness and holiness is so great.<sup>144</sup>

Ideas of substitution are certainly present in Paul, notwithstanding our previous discussion concerning whether the intent of Paul's writing was exclusive substitution or inclusive representation. Similarly, Paul also uses at times language of justification from the courtroom setting. But in penal substitution, these two themes collide to produce a model of the atonement and an image of God that has become the prevailing theory amongst evangelical Christians. So powerful are the ideas of penal substitution that adherence to its tenets has become a matter of doctrine for evangelicals. That this is so is indicated by the exclusion of Steve Chalke from a speaking role at "Spring Harvest," a major evangelical conference in the UK, because, "Steve Chalke has made his dislike of penal substitution really, really clear, and ... we didn't feel the nature of the atonement was one of those things you could agree to disagree over."<sup>145</sup> Pastor and popular writer and speaker John MacArthur also indicates his vehement adherence to penal substitution as being the only understanding of the atonement, when he comments that those offering an alternative view are "liberals, cultists, and pseudo-Christian religionists."<sup>146</sup>

Adherents to penal substitution claim a biblical foundation for the theory, citing many biblical references to the sinfulness of humanity. They focus on God's righteousness and wrath, using Paul's metaphor of justification to frame the problem as a legal one, and often also appeal to images of blood sacrifice and the prophecy of the suffering servant in Isaiah 53.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>144</sup> See Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 568-80.

<sup>145</sup> Madison Trammel, "Cross Purposes: Biggest Christian Conference Splits Amid Growing Atonement Debate," *Christianity Today*, 2 July 2007, <<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/july/7.15.html>> (Accessed 12 November 2016).

<sup>146</sup> John MacArthur, *The Murder of Jesus: A Study of How Jesus Died* (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 2000), 219. Cited in Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 93.

<sup>147</sup> Hilborn comments also on the historical roots of penal substitution: "Sympathetic evangelical accounts characteristically trace its development though Clement of Rome in the first century, Cyril of Jerusalem in the fourth, Augustine in the fifth, John Calvin in the sixteenth, and John Owen in the seventeenth, ultimately ascribing its more detailed form to the nineteenth-century Princeton theologians Charles Hodge and Benjamin B. Warfield." Hilborn, "Atonement, Evangelicalism and the Evangelical Alliance," 19.

In the following outline, we follow Schreiner, as his presentation is typical of proponents of the theory. Human beings have “all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom 3:23), and as such have broken God’s law. Even failure to keep one law “brands us as a law-breaker and hence guilty before God.”<sup>148</sup> Because God is holy and perfect, he demands perfection from people, but because people are sinful, such perfection is impossible. Violation of God’s law is heinous because it constitutes rebellion against God’s lordship and as such, sin is personal. God is therefore personally angry at sin and judges sin retributively.<sup>149</sup> Schreiner expounds 2 Thessalonians 1:5-9, commenting: “Paul emphasizes in verse 6 that retributive and eternal judgment for sin is ‘just’ (*dikaïos*).”<sup>150</sup> Because God is righteous and does not overlook sin, his response to this situation of sinful and rebellious humanity, is to punish. Because of his great righteousness and humanity’s depth of sinfulness, the punishment must be extreme. The only alternative is that “sin must be atoned for by sacrifice. There must be a penal substitute. We begin by thinking of Old Testament sacrifices.”<sup>151</sup> Schreiner’s reading of Isaiah 53, which he describes, correctly, as the most important messianic text in the Old Testament, is as a literal prophecy: “The passage also teaches clearly and often that Christ Jesus died in place of sinners, taking their penalty on himself. We also see in verse 10 that it was God’s will to crush him...In his death Christ satisfied the wrath of God.”<sup>152</sup>

While Schreiner’s account of Penal substitution may seem extreme, it is a common view held by many evangelicals, including popular preachers and pastors as well as academics.<sup>153</sup> Penal substitution as a theory, and penal substitutionary ideas, often uncritically espoused, is endemic in evangelical Christianity, most usually to the exclusion of other atonement metaphors. However, there are a number of serious issues

---

<sup>148</sup> Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” 74.

<sup>149</sup> See *ibid.*, 77.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>153</sup> In addition to the penal substitutionary proponents already mentioned, see the following influential texts: Stott, *The Cross of Christ*; J. I. Packer and Mark Dever, *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008); Roger R. Hill Charles E. James Frank A. Nicole, *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004).

with the theory that have been strongly critiqued over the last 20 years in particular, and we will consider those briefly now.<sup>154</sup>

Our first concern with penal substitution is that it presents a picture of the Trinity that effectively divides the godhead into a potentially angry father-figure and a passive son who appears almost resigned to his fate. This is problematic firstly because it creates an image of God who is to be feared, and secondly, perhaps more importantly, because it robs the cross of the theological power that lies in the scandalous revelation that God was in Christ, participating fully in the powerlessness of being abused and killed. As Moltmann puts it, “God not only acted in the crucifixion of Jesus or sorrowfully allowed it to happen, but was himself active with his own being in the dying Jesus and suffered with him.”<sup>155</sup> A “crucified God” is a quantum leap from an angry God killing his own son, and all presentations of penal substitution, regardless of whether they appeal to the relationships of father and son as parts of the Trinity, risk losing sight of this. In the penal substitution model, it is easy to draw the conclusion that God is retributive, angry and needing to punish, and Jesus came to save us from God.<sup>156</sup> One corollary of this is that Jesus’ life, ministry, proclamation of forgiveness, confrontation of the powers, and finally resurrection from the dead, become unnecessary as everything of importance is accomplished through his death. As Chalke laments, “Surely we cannot embrace a theology in which Jesus’ entire thirty-three-year incarnation could be reduced to a long weekend’s activity.”<sup>157</sup> Rather, we need an understanding of the cross that takes seriously the insights of Trinitarian theology, and rethinks images of a father who needs to exact justice to satisfy his own righteousness. Such images are unacceptable to a modern understanding of human fatherhood, and as such are hard to contemplate in the God in whose image we are made. Belousek proposes such an alternative, suggesting that in the cross God the father absorbs all the pain, loss, brokenness, humiliation, weakness and death into himself and deals with it there. Through the cross, “God-in-Christ enters into the deepest wound of a broken world – a wound opened by sin, generating corruption, and leading unto death – and so comes to

---

<sup>154</sup> Hardin claims (in 2007) that “In the last decade the overwhelming majority of books published on the atonement, in one way or another, revise, critique, dismiss or outright reject the penal satisfaction theory of the atonement.” Hardin, “Out of the Fog,” 65.

<sup>155</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 190.

<sup>156</sup> See Mark D. Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross: Contemporary Images of the Atonement* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006), 22.

<sup>157</sup> Chalke, “The Redemption of the Cross,” 39.

know by personal experience real humiliation and weakness, pain and loss, all in order to heal that wound.”<sup>158</sup>

A second concern is the impact that penal substitutionary images of God might have on an individual’s psychological wellbeing. Belousek notes the results of the Baylor Religion Survey (2006) that found that Americans in general hold four different predominant images of God: an Authoritarian God (31.4%), a Benevolent God (23%), a Critical God (16%), and a Distant God (24.4%). Accordingly, 71.8% of Americans believe in a God who is primarily critical, distant or authoritarian. Belousek concludes, “The main God of evangelical Christians, then, is an ‘angry God.’”<sup>159</sup> While there are serious implications from this finding with regard to the mission and outreach of the church, there is, closer to home a concern for how this impacts on believers. Not only can images of the suffering Jesus encourage Christians to passively tolerate abuse in the name of “being Christ-like,”<sup>160</sup> but images of God as angry can promote attitudes of needing to appease God through manipulation in order to stay safe or gain status in life. Finlan expresses similar concerns regarding the psychological impact of the prevalence of guilt and shame as responses to the penal substitutionary presentation of God. He suggests that this leads to people developing the manipulative strategies of bargaining, appeasement and even self-punishment because of fear of a temperamental and judgmental God. Finlan’s conclusion is that such a transactional understanding of God was at the heart of the Reformation’s intense focus on guilt and subsequent gratitude, and that this has left a powerful, painful, psychological legacy: “The affective (feeling) corollary of the beliefs is a pattern of shame, release, and submissive gratitude. Release from doom at the hands of God produces feelings of gratitude, but even more of

---

<sup>158</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 311.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>160</sup> See Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, 22. Feminist theologians have launched a stern critique of all forms of patriarchy and its abuses, including images of the cross that portray God as punishing his son. “Christianity is an abusive theology that glorifies suffering. Is it any wonder that there is so much abuse in modern society when the predominant image or theology of the culture is of ‘divine child abuse’ – God the Father demanding and carrying out the suffering and death of his own son? If Christianity is to be liberating for the oppressed, it must itself be liberated from this theology.” Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, “For God so Loved the World?” in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York, N.Y: Pilgrim Press, 1989), 26.

*indebtedness*. The atonement doctrine, even while it replaces the actual sacrificial ritual, perpetuates the sacrificial beliefs and emotions.”<sup>161</sup>

Our third concern with penal substitution is that while it presents an individualistic response to the issue of personal guilt, such an approach undermines both the intent of the Incarnation in terms of the incoming Kingdom of God, and also, by focusing of the individual, underplays the significance of sin in corporate and global abuses of power. Baker and Green outline the individualistic and legal framework of Western culture that leads to ready acceptance of penal substitutionary ideas,<sup>162</sup> and Baker laments that this individualistic conception of sin is “anemic in that it portrays sin ...in terms of moral failure or transgression of a law.”<sup>163</sup> In a similar way, Gunton expresses concern that penal substitution theory reads the New Testament legal metaphor too literally and individualistically, and in focusing on an individual response loses sight of real evil in the world: “At issue is the actuality of the atonement: whether the real evil of the real world is faced and healed *ontologically* in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.”<sup>164</sup>

Penal substitutionary theory focuses on the guilt of individuals, and on the amazing love of God who gives his own son to solve the problem he has accepting us in our sinful state. In doing so, it buys into and perpetuates the view that retributive violence is the way to solve problems. By focusing on individual guilt, the metanarrative of redemptive violence goes unchallenged, and yet arguably this challenge is one of the major themes of the biblical narrative, that concludes in Jesus, who first preaches “You have heard that it was said, ‘An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.’ But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer” (Mt 5:39), and then goes on to demonstrate an utter refusal to respond to the very worst violence that humanity could throw at him. In the cross we see a God who enters into the depths of human misery and yet will not exact retribution on those who persecute and kill him. Hardin considers all theories of the atonement that work on an exchange principle, including penal substitution, and concludes that the multiple recent critiques of such approaches to the atonement have exposed them as being inadequate. He concludes, “These theories muddy the waters of good news and

---

<sup>161</sup> Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 82-83. While we concur with Finlan in his assessment of the risks of penal substitutionary theory, his account of Hebrew sacrifice caricatures the sacrificial system as primarily appeasing God, whereas the logic of sacrifice may have been more healthy and less condemning.

<sup>162</sup> See Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 42-48.

<sup>163</sup> Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*, 21.

<sup>164</sup> Gunton, *The Actuality of Atonement a Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition*, 165.

inevitably come under the spell of violence, reciprocity and vengeance. The world longs for the God of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the One in 'whom there is no shadow of turning,' 'who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all'..."<sup>165</sup> In considering the influence of atonement theories in contemporary society, Ray concurs with this concern, and writes, "Ironically, the very doctrine whose job it is to attempt to understand and articulate God's response to evil perpetuates evil in the lives of many women, men, and children...certain interpretations of love, fidelity, honor, power, justice, obedience, punishment, suffering, and sacrifice – can and do lead to the theological sanctioning of sexual and domestic abuse."<sup>166</sup>

#### 2.4.3.3 Governmental theory

A further interpretation of the "Objective" approach is that proposed during the period of the Reformation by Dutch Calvinist turned Arminian, Hugo Grotius. Governmental theory, also known as Moral Government theory, has perhaps been less influential than its objective relatives, but has been generally accepted in the Wesleyan/Methodist tradition. It appears that Grotius was trying to find a middle ground between the emerging penal substitutionary approach and the subjective moral influence theory, as Grotius' theory takes a strong view of God's justice and law but still presents God as the loving creator and moral governor of the universe who has no intrinsic need to punish humanity before forgiving.<sup>167</sup> God is willing to forgive simply because he is loving, and he does not punish Jesus so that he can forgive. This in itself is a welcome reprieve from penal substitution, but leaves the question hanging as to why Jesus had to die. According to Governmental theory, "God's hatred of sin is demonstrated by the suffering of Christ."<sup>168</sup> This demonstration of the extreme consequences of sin is intended to inspire sinful humanity to better moral behavior. The strength of Governmental theory is that it correctly identifies that God is not bound by any laws that dictate when or how he is permitted to forgive.<sup>169</sup> The Old Testament contains many examples of God choosing to forgive out of the goodness of his character or in

---

<sup>165</sup> Hardin, "Out of the Fog," 73.

<sup>166</sup> Ray, *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom*, 2-3.

<sup>167</sup> For brief comments on Moral Government theory, see Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, 17-18. Also Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 582-86.

<sup>168</sup> Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, 18.

<sup>169</sup> For a discussion of God's freedom to forgive, as expressed in the Torah, the Prophets and the Psalms, see Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 199-208.

response to some petition from a righteous person, a feature that penal substitutionary theory fails to acknowledge. On the other hand, Governmental theory also fails to take seriously enough the endemic nature of sin as expressed in abuses of power, inequality in society, and the sin of violence as expressed in racism, sexism and corporate greed. Simply being aware of the supreme sacrifice of Christ seems inadequate to bring about the moral change expected by this theory.

#### 2.4.4 MORAL INFLUENCE

Moral Influence theories are typically referred to as the “Subjective” theories because their main focus is on humanity; what is done for and achieved in humanity through the cross, as opposed to what is done for God and achieved in him as considered by “Objective” theories. The origins of Moral Influence ideas are usually traced to Peter Abelard, a younger contemporary of Anselm’s, who actively criticized Satisfaction theory from the outset.<sup>170</sup> Abelard disagreed with the Ransom theory’s need for a payment to Satan or God, and with the Satisfaction theory, because, he reasoned, if the death of Christ was required to satisfy God’s honor for the offence caused by Adam’s sin, then the act of killing the son of God would in turn create an even greater offence that could never be satisfied. Abelard reasoned that it would have been easier for God to overlook the first “lighter” sins than to create a situation where humanity is indicted by the far greater sin. Abelard was also concerned that God could be so cruel as to demand the death of an innocent person.<sup>171</sup>

Abelard’s response to the failings he saw in the Christus Victor and Satisfaction theories was to propose a third paradigm wherein the work of the cross exists primarily in “demonstrating to the world the amazing depth of God’s love for sinful humanity.”<sup>172</sup> Strengths of Abelard’s work are that for him, Jesus’ whole life matters as much as his death does: Jesus’ teaching, healing and approach to people demonstrate the love of God in the same way as his death does, and together these inspire us to respond in love

---

<sup>170</sup> See Aulen, *Christus Victor*, 112. Finlan suggests that Gregory of Nazianzus, who critiqued Gregory of Nyssa’s Ransom theory, perhaps “anticipates the so-called ‘moral influence theory’ of later centuries by stressing that Christ could have saved us any way he chose, but that he wanted to inspire people to imitate his sympathy.” Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 69.

<sup>171</sup> See Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*, 112. Also Johnson, *Patriotic and Medieval Atonement Theory: A Guide to Research*, 122-23.

<sup>172</sup> Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, 19.

to God. He also saw that forgiveness had to mean “making the sinner better,”<sup>173</sup> whereas satisfaction theory need not result in any inward change at all.

For Abelard, people can be reconciled to God, not because of any transaction effected by the cross, but by choosing to love God in response to his love, as seen in the life and death of Jesus. God is free to forgive and redeem whomever he chooses, the cross does not release him to do so.<sup>174</sup> This of course is a point of contention for critics of Abelard as it raises the question as to why Jesus would need to die. The cross could appear as an unfortunate postscript to Jesus’ life. Abelard also downplays the role of God’s judgment. In one sense this is positive as it removes any sense of God as vindictive or capricious, but Baker and Green express concern that this avoids an important issue and that Abelard’s model would be strengthened by “depicting God’s judgment as part of God’s love and distinguishing it from vindictive retribution.”<sup>175</sup>

It appears that Abelard’s work failed to gain much of a foothold in his own time. Abelard was condemned by the Council of Sens in 1140 and excommunicated. During the Reformation era, Socinus proposed what has come to be known as Moral Example theory, and Socinus himself was later charged with a number of heresies.<sup>176</sup> Moral Influence theory has continued to be championed in a number of quarters, particularly in the liberal Protestant tradition, with important contributions from Bushnell,<sup>177</sup> Rashdall<sup>178</sup> and also Schleiermacher.<sup>179</sup>

## 2.5 CONCLUSION

The death of Christ on a cross stands as a fundamentally important dimension of Christian faith, as Christians believe that his death was “for us and for our salvation.” Both Old and New Testaments are replete with images that speak to the need for humanity to be saved; to find salvation; to be healed. And yet despite the rich biblical

---

<sup>173</sup> Hastings Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology* (London: Macmillan, 1919), 359. Cited in Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*, 74.

<sup>174</sup> See Johnson, *Patristic and Medieval Atonement Theory: A Guide to Research*, 123.

<sup>175</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 164.

<sup>176</sup> Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, 19.

<sup>177</sup> Horace Bushnell, *The Vicarious Sacrifice, Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation* (New York: C. Scribner & Co., 1866).

<sup>178</sup> Rashdall, *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*.

<sup>179</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963).



material, or perhaps because of the diversity of that material, the church has struggled to come to a consensus regarding the atonement. Nevertheless, scripture provides many insights, metaphors and images concerning the ways in which Jesus' death and resurrection can be understood as addressing the problems that beset humanity, from the personal level right through to the global level.

In this chapter we began by discussing three concerns that need to be taken into account when considering atonement images found in scripture: specifically, the importance of taking care with understanding the language and context of the images of atonement, and similarly, the need to understand God's wrath within the context of the whole biblical narrative. We then surveyed a range of Old Testament and New Testament images that lie behind our thinking about the death of Christ on the cross, as many of these images form the basis for the development of the various atonement theories. The multiple images present in scripture all form an important part of the picture of Christ's death.

We then considered three important issues of interpretation related to atonement theology, and suggested firstly, that atonement theories would do well to consider the use of *hilasterion* in Rom 3:25 as the "mercy seat": the place of God's presence with us, rather than as propitiation or expiation. Secondly, we suggested the importance of an understanding of the phrase "for us" that takes into account the inclusive place-taking of Christ, and thirdly that it is important to avoid seeing the cross as a transaction of some sort, rather than as the gracious work of God.

In the second part of the chapter, we discussed some of the main theories of the atonement that have been present in the church over the centuries and considered some strengths and weaknesses of these different theories. In doing this, we have laid out a framework for understanding the atonement that will serve as a basis for understanding the ideas presented by participants as we move on to the interview stage of this research. The major concern is whether particular understandings of the atonement have an impact on the wellbeing of those who hold those beliefs, and so we turn in the next chapter to establish a methodological framework that will allow us to address this question with participants.



## Chapter 3

### Grounded Theory: Methodology and Methods

#### 3.1 INTRODUCTION

Grounded theory is a research methodology that has existed for only fifty years. In this short time it has grown to a widely used qualitative research methodology, and yet at the same time its principles and methods have been strongly debated and contested, with significant divergences between the creators of the methodology. In the early 1960s, two American sociologists, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss conducted collaborative research on the experience of dying in American hospitals. Their research resulted in the publication of *Awareness of Dying*<sup>1</sup> and *Time for Dying*<sup>2</sup>, and as a result of their new approach to qualitative research, also produced the seminal grounded theory text, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.<sup>3</sup>

Grounded theory was in large part a response to what Glaser and Strauss saw as the dominance of positivist quantitative research, that in their minds operated simply to provide verification for already established theories. Their experience in the American university system suggested that graduate students carried out most research in order to verify the theories proposed and established by their seniors, leaving little or no scope for the exploration of new theory. In reaction to this dominant paradigm, Glaser and Strauss developed the methodology of grounded theory for the purpose of "...the discovery of theory from data systematically obtained from social research."<sup>4</sup>

Glaser and Strauss's successful collaboration was achieved in spite of their quite different backgrounds. Glaser was a graduate of the positivist Columbia University's Bureau of Applied Social Research, having studied under Paul Lazarsfeld. Strauss, on the other hand, was a product of Chicago University's pragmatist and symbolic interactionist tradition, having studied under Herbert Blumer.<sup>5</sup> Despite their

---

<sup>1</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *Awareness of Dying* (Chicago: Aldine, 1965).

<sup>2</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *Time for Dying* (Chicago, Ill.: Aldine, 1968).

<sup>3</sup> Barney G. Glaser and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory : Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1967).

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

differences, Glaser and Strauss had the common goal of asserting the possibility of reliability and validity in qualitative research, which was assumed to be possible only through quantitative analysis. They achieved this by creating "...a method with a solid core of data analysis and theory construction."<sup>6</sup> As already stated, they also wanted to be able to generate theory rather than simply verifying existing theory.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, grounded theory grew slowly in its popularity, particularly in the fields of sociology and nursing, and then from the 1980s onwards the methodology grew more rapidly in popularity, also expanding to become more commonly used in a wider range of disciplines. By the end of the century, grounded theory had become a prominent qualitative research method.<sup>7</sup> However, along with this increase in popularity as a methodology, it must also be noted that a significant number of studies that claim to use grounded theory in fact do not adhere to the essential principles of the methodology, but rather, appear to follow a more generic style of qualitative analysis whilst claiming adherence to grounded theory. This may be due in part to lack of understanding of what is a diverse and complex set of methods, and it may also be because grounded theory methods have come to be understood in some circles as providing a "degree of licence to the researcher, particularly in the early stages of producing a proposal, and hence use of GTM would later be claimed in published accounts."<sup>8</sup> The result is that while two out of three published qualitative research

---

<sup>5</sup> For a substantial discussion of the academic backgrounds of Glaser and Strauss and the historical context of their work, see Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006), 5-10.

<sup>6</sup> See Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective: An Epistemological Account," in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 33.

<sup>7</sup> For the increase in prevalence of grounded theory, see for example, Hood, who writes, "According to the Social Science Citation Index, there were 101 journal article citations to *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* in the 1970s, 296 in the 1980s, 472 in the 1990s, and 605 between 2000 and 2006. However, the use of the term 'grounded theory' has proliferated even faster than have citations to Glaser and Strauss. An Academic Premier search for 'grounded theory' in the text of journal articles from a variety of disciplines finds just 17 articles mentioning GT in the 1970s, 81 in the 1980s, 1485 in the 1990s (when more journals were indexed) but 4357 in the just the (sic) first 6 years of this century." Jane C. Hood, "Orthodoxy Vs. Power: The Defining Traits of Grounded Theory," *ibid.*, 151. See also Bryant and Charmaz: "...by 2000 Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, and Vetter could report in their bibliometric survey of qualitative methods that for the period 1991-1998, GTM received 2622 citations in the Social Science Citation Index out of a total of 4134 citations to all types of methods, quantitative as well as qualitative – almost 64% of the total; with the remaining percentage shared between 11 other methods." Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Introduction: Grounded Theory Research: Methods and Practices," *ibid.*, 2., citing S. Titscher et al., "Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

<sup>8</sup> Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective: An Epistemological Account." 47. Bryant also writes, "...mention of GTM is used as a way of masking 'an *anything goes*

papers claim to use grounded theory,<sup>9</sup> a great number of these “are not doing anything that would be recognizable as such even when using the most inclusive definition of the term.”<sup>10</sup>

In the development of grounded theory, one of the most significant events was the divergence of opinion, and use of methods, between Glaser and Strauss. Their eventual separation was foreshadowed by Glaser’s publication of *Theoretical Sensitivity*<sup>11</sup> and Strauss’s *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*,<sup>12</sup> but the final parting of the ways was marked by the publication of Strauss’s and Corbin’s *Basics of Qualitative Research*,<sup>13</sup> which prompted a strong rebuttal from Glaser in the form of his *Basics of Grounded Theory*.<sup>14</sup> The divergence of opinion between Glaser and Strauss was not a surprise, given their diverse academic backgrounds in the first place. In some senses, their theoretical divergence paved the way for a wider interest in grounded theory and for the subsequent development of the range of approaches that exist today. In recent years, developments in grounded theory have centered around epistemological concerns and the influence of these on the methods used, and so today, grounded theory represents a “constellation of methods,”<sup>15</sup> which is seen by many grounded theorists as evidence of the way in which recent reconsideration of the philosophical and core methodological issues has “initiated a flourishing interest in methods enhancement and development.”<sup>16</sup>

---

approach’ that is methodologically arbitrary and ultimately indefensible. A large number of those professing to use GTM exhibit this laxity of interpretation of the method, often accompanied by a philosophical naiveté and confusion similar to that exhibited by Glaser and Strauss themselves.” A. Bryant, “Re-Grounding Grounded Theory,” *Journal of Information Technology Theory and Application* 4, no. 1 (2002): 32.

<sup>9</sup> Titscher et al., “Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis.”

<sup>10</sup> Hood, “Orthodoxy Vs. Power: The Defining Traits of Grounded Theory,” 152.

<sup>11</sup> Barney G. Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity : Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1978).

<sup>12</sup> Anselm L. Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research : Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Barney G. Glaser, *Emergence Vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Kathy Charmaz, “Shifting the Grounds: Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods,” in *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation*, ed. Janice M. Morse, et al. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009), 128.

<sup>16</sup> Bryant and Charmaz, “Introduction,” 4. Barnett expresses this flexibility in this way: “Methodological variations are linked to the researcher’s philosophical position along the methodological spiral, most often distinguishing the positionality of the researcher and the approach to data analysis within a grounded theory research design.” Dori Barnett, “Constructing New Theory for Identifying Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Constructivist Approach to Grounded Theory,” *The Grounded Theory Review* 11, no. 1 (2012): 48-49.

One such development is that of constructivist grounded theory, which will be the focus of more extensive discussion later in this chapter.

One point of confusion in need of clarification regards the use of the term ‘grounded theory’ itself. Over the years, ‘grounded theory’ has been used to refer both to a methodology or process of research on one hand, and a theory produced as a product of the research on the other. A number of authors now resolve this distinction by referring to the methodology as Grounded Theory Methodology (GTM) while any theory produced is simply referred to as a grounded theory.<sup>17</sup> Where significant, I intend to follow this distinction from this point forward.

The primary goal of any grounded theory research is “the discovery of theory from data.”<sup>18</sup> GTM is particularly useful for investigating the meanings that people construct and hold for experienced events, and for addressing “social processes composed of meanings, which are meant to be clarified and made public.”<sup>19</sup> In considering the question of when it is appropriate to use GTM, Birks and Mills contend that because GTM has the primary goal of generating theory, it is particularly indicated where there is little extant knowledge or research of the area of concern. They write, “Grounded theory results in the generation of new knowledge in the form of theory; therefore areas where little is known about a particular topic are most deserving of research effort.”<sup>20</sup> It is for this reason that GTM is considered the methodology most suited to the present study.

In this chapter, I will outline some of the historical debate around the emergence and development of grounded theory, in particular considering the epistemological and theoretical differences that have developed over the years since its inception. I will first consider general and widely accepted features of the methodology, before turning to explore the constructivist version of grounded theory. In doing so, I will distinguish between epistemologies, methodologies and methods, as outlined by Michael Crotty in

---

<sup>17</sup> See, for example, Bryant and Charmaz, “Introduction,” 2. See also Bryant, “Re-Grounding Grounded Theory,” 27.

<sup>18</sup> Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, 1.

<sup>19</sup> K. Backman and H. A. Kyngäs, “Challenges of the Grounded Theory Approach to a Novice Researcher,” *Nursing & Health Sciences* 1, no. 3 (1999): 147.

<sup>20</sup> Melanie Birks and Jane Mills, *Grounded Theory : A Practical Guide* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2011), 16-17.

his work *The Foundations of Social Research*.<sup>21</sup> Methods are the practical activities that are commonly carried out as actions in a research investigation, whereas the methodology refers to the principles and ideas that inform the way the research is planned and structured. The underpinning philosophical framework is also critical, because as Birks and Mills rightly point out, this “influences how the researcher works with the participants...Depending on their philosophical beliefs and adopted methodology, researchers take either a position of distance or acknowledged inclusion...”<sup>22</sup> Finally, I will explain the specific methods and processes used in the approach to this study, with relevant examples to explicate the various methodological decisions made.

## **3.2 EARLY GROUNDED THEORISTS: GLASER, STRAUSS AND CORBIN**

### **3.2.1 PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK**

As has already been briefly mentioned, Glaser and Strauss developed GTM at least in part as a reaction to the dominant, positivist, quantitative expectations of research that were held in the middle of the twentieth century. They were searching for a way to do research that could produce valid and rigorous theory from within a qualitative framework, rather than simply validating existing theory through quantitative verification. They came to this task, however, from different theoretical backgrounds, with Glaser being schooled at Columbia University under Lazarsfeld’s empirical emphasis while Strauss attended Chicago University. At Chicago, Strauss came under the tutelage of Herbert Blumer, who himself was influenced by the pragmatists John Dewey and George Mead. Following the pragmatists, Blumer developed the methodological position that he termed symbolic interactionism.<sup>23</sup> Elucidating the basic principle of symbolic interactionism, Blumer wrote, “The peculiarity consists in the fact that human beings interpret or ‘define’ each other’s actions instead of merely reacting to each other’s actions. Their ‘response’ is not made directly to the actions of one another

---

<sup>21</sup> Michael Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research : Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 2-6.

<sup>22</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory : A Practical Guide*, 4.

<sup>23</sup> See Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm L. Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2008), 2. See also Bryant, “Re-Grounding Grounded Theory,” 28.

but instead is based on the meaning which they attach to such actions.”<sup>24</sup> Putting this another way, Stern and Porr explain:

Social interaction... impacts how we think about ourselves and how and why we behave as we do. People act based on their interpreted meanings of symbols, including assessment of how other people behave or what they think about the things around them. Symbols range from physical objects to institutions, persons, ideals and virtues, and they take on significance and meaning during interaction.<sup>25</sup>

The pragmatist tradition also had an impact on the development of GTM through its reaction to positivism. In contrast to the positivist search for single, fixed solutions to problems, pragmatists sought to accept the possibility of greater uncertainty, and accepted “multiple perspectives emerging from people’s actions to solve problems in their worlds.”<sup>26</sup>

These two traditions of pragmatism and symbolic interactionism clearly had a strong influence on early development of GTM.<sup>27</sup> Bryant and Charmaz highlight the strong compatibilities between GTM and symbolic interactionism, claiming “Both the theoretical perspective and the method assume an agentic actor, the significance of studying processes, the emphasis on building useful theory from empirical observations, and the development of conditional theories that address specific realities.”<sup>28</sup> Strauss and Corbin, in their text that signaled the methodological break from Glaser, included sixteen assumptions of their methodology that are based on pragmatist and symbolic interactionist assumptions. Their summary of these assumptions is that

The world is very complex. There are no simple explanations for things. Rather, events are the result of multiple factors coming together and interacting in complex and often unanticipated ways. Therefore any methodology that attempts to understand experience and explain situations will have to be complex.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup> Herbert Blumer, *Symbolic Interactionism* (Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969), 19., cited in Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Phyllis Noerager Stern and Caroline Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011), 29.

<sup>26</sup> Charmaz, “Shifting the Grounds: Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods,” 128.

<sup>27</sup> See for example Stern and Porr, who write, “Symbolic interactionism coupled with pragmatism served as key drivers to the internal workings of grounded theory and enabled Strauss and Glaser to methodologically account for human action in the context of problematic situations.” Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 29-30.

<sup>28</sup> Bryant and Charmaz, “Introduction: Grounded Theory Research: Methods and Practices,” 21.

<sup>29</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 8. The sixteen assumptions are laid out in full from p. 6-8.



## 3.2.2 METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

### 3.2.2.1 The Position of the Researcher

The matter of concern here is the role that the researcher plays in the research and whether this role is even a matter for consideration. Within a positivist framework, the researcher is seen as the expert outsider who is unaffected by the research process and whose role is to gather data, establish the facts and state the truth. Because of the epistemological foundations discussed above, the early formulations of GTM had the stated goal of resisting positivist expectations of the researcher, and consequently moving towards a position more in line with the principles of symbolic interactionism, where the researcher is considered part of the research process, both affected by the research and having an impact on the research. Despite these expectations, early grounded theorists seemed to persist in seeing the researcher in the role of independent, unaffected expert. This was probably due, at least in part, to the predominant expectations of the time, particularly in the academic world, where rigorous statistically-based quantitative research was most likely to gain funding and where emerging qualitative methods needed to be able to prove that they could also be valid. The other factor of course was that Glaser himself was schooled in the positivist tradition and therefore was comfortable with positivist expectations of researchers.<sup>30</sup> That positivism had such a strong influence on early GTM methodology is clearly seen in both the repeated use of the term 'data', which has a clear association with production of numerical and statistical data, even though in GTM the term most usually refers to written or spoken text, and in the very name of the original text: *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Bryant and Charmaz contend that even in the title of this seminal text, the influence of positivism is clearly visible: they claim that it "...attests to a clear epistemological orientation that assumes that reality can be discovered, explored, and understood. From this perspective, reality is unitary, knowable, and waiting to be discovered."<sup>31</sup> Thus, although early GTM sought to distance itself from positivist methodology in response to the pragmatist influence, it remained tied to such expectations, particularly with regard to the role of the researcher. The split between Glaser and Strauss brought about some change in this regard, with Glaser retaining

---

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of these matters, see Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective," 35.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 34.

expectations of researcher neutrality, whilst Strauss in association with Corbin moved more towards embracing a view that sees the researcher as involved in the process, both influencing and being influenced by participants, a position more reflective of the symbolic interactionist framework.<sup>32</sup> For researchers using GTM, it is important to be clear about their theoretical perspective, and this is especially true for those following an early formulation of the methodology as they need to avoid the original lack of clarity around the issue.

### 3.2.2.2 Induction and Abduction

In keeping with the stated aim of generating theory rather than simply verifying existing theory, GTM needed to develop approaches to data analysis that did more than proceed from existing theory to the verification of new data. Within a positivist framework, research starts with existing theory and then sets out to test new information against that theory, in order to decide whether the new data 'fits' or does not. This form of data analysis utilizes the procedure of subsumption,<sup>33</sup> which starts with a theory or law and then seeks to see if the data expresses or fits with that theory. This process is one of deduction and is the common feature of positivist efforts to verify theory, as new information is tested against existing theory. Glaser and Strauss' problem with deductive analysis, and the driving force behind their development of GTM, was that deduction fails to generate new theory as it only tests new data against existing paradigms.<sup>34</sup>

In contrast with deductive analysis, GTM is an inductive methodology, by which we mean that the process of analysis begins with specific situations and proceeds by then moving to more abstract, conceptual ideas. Charmaz defines induction as "a type of reasoning that begins with study of a range of individual cases and extrapolates from them to form a conceptual category."<sup>35</sup> Reichertz explains this as "supplement(ing) the observed features of a sample with others that are not perceived."<sup>36</sup> Induction holds the

---

<sup>32</sup> See Bryant and Charmaz, "Introduction: Grounded Theory Research," 21.

<sup>33</sup> Reichertz discusses three forms of data analysis: subsumption, generalizing and assembling/discovering and relates these in turn to the intellectual operations of deduction, induction and abduction. Jo Reichertz, "Abduction: The Logic of Discovery of Grounded Theory," *ibid.*, 218-19.

<sup>34</sup> See Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective," 44.

<sup>35</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 188.

<sup>36</sup> Reichertz, "Abduction," 219. Note that Reichertz distinguishes between quantitative induction and qualitative induction.

potential of being able to generate new theory from analysis of individual data sets, but this promise does not exclude that fact that the inductive process also has its problems. In particular, the difficulty with induction is that as consecutive observations build towards an explanatory theory, the researcher will at times be challenged with what to do with exceptional circumstances that do not fit the emerging theory. In a similar way, the inductive process relies on the ability of the researcher to be able to identify concepts running through the experiences they are dealing with, and then to raise these to categories at a higher conceptual level, placing significant reliance on the expertise of the researcher.<sup>37</sup>

GTM is also seen as being an abductive process. Although abduction was not an articulated part of Glaser's and Strauss' formulation of GTM, it has come to be recognized as integral though unstated, particularly to Strauss' developments following his split from Glaser. In part this is due to the developing recognition of the influence on Strauss of the early pragmatists, including Charles S. Peirce. Peirce was the first to take up and use the term abduction, which he "used to denote the only truly *knowledge-extending* means of inferencing (so he claimed) that would be categorically distinct from the normal types of logical conclusion, namely *deduction* and *induction*."<sup>38</sup> Peirce's ideas around abduction were not formally picked up and systematized at the time of his proposals, but the seeds of his ideas can be seen in Strauss' later developments of GTM, even though Strauss himself did not appear to make the connection to Peirce's abduction.<sup>39</sup> The logic of abduction takes account, at least in part, of induction's failure to account for surprising cases. With abduction, surprising anomalies are utilized to generate new explanations through the gathering of new data accumulated in the effort to explain the otherwise unexplained situation. Reichertz explains this process as "...a cerebral process, an intellectual act, a mental leap, that brings together things which one had never associated with one another. A cognitive logic of discovery."<sup>40</sup> It is ideas such as these that are reflected in Strauss' explanation of the grounded theory method:

Creativity is also a vital component of the grounded theory method. Its procedures force the researcher to break through assumptions and to create new

---

<sup>37</sup> See Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective," 45.

<sup>38</sup> Jo Reichertz, "Abduction," 216. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>39</sup> See *ibid.*, 215. Reichertz contends here that the growing presence of abduction in Strauss' version of GTM was one of the significant features of the Glaser-Strauss divide.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

order out of the old. Creativity manifests itself in the ability of the researcher to aptly name categories; and also to let the mind wander and make the free associations that are necessary for generating stimulating questions and for coming up with a comparison that leads to discovery.<sup>41</sup>

With abduction, this creativity is expressed in the search for a new explanation for the surprising anomaly. According to Reichertz, “Since no suitable ‘type’ can be found, a new one must be invented or discovered by means of a mental process. One may achieve a discovery of this sort as a result of an intellectual process and, if this happens, it takes place ‘like lightening,’ and the thought process ‘is very little hampered by logical rules’”<sup>42</sup> Peirce describes the conditions that need to be in place for abduction to occur, and paradoxically perhaps, he lists two quite different situations: one where the researcher is faced with such pressure, fear or uncertainty that they are forced into seizing onto solutions almost without thinking, and secondly the situation where the researcher allows his or her mind to wander in daydream and there finds the unexpected solution. For Peirce, both situations produce an environment where the consciously working mind is outmaneuvered.<sup>43</sup> For Reichertz, the charm of abduction lies in the blending of two worlds, the logical and the insightful: “...it is a *logical* inference (and thereby reasonable and scientific), however it extends into the realm of profound insight (and therefore generates new knowledge).”<sup>44</sup>

### 3.2.2.3 Emergence vs Forcing

In the early GTM of Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*, one of the central features of the methodology was that theory should emerge from the data, rather than being imposed or forced upon it. As discussed previously, this was an important part of Glaser’s and Strauss’ desire to generate new theory as opposed to verifying existing theory. The idea was that the neutral, uninvolved and unbiased observer would be able to generate theory by simply breaking data down into codes, and then, by employing a theoretically sensitive approach to those codes from a neutral perspective, new theoretical categories would emerge.<sup>45</sup> Thus, two basic rules of category building

---

<sup>41</sup> Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Reichertz, “Abduction,” 219., citing Charles S. Peirce, *The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*, 8 vols., vol. 5 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935), 117.

<sup>43</sup> For an in-depth discussion of these processes, see Reichertz, “Abduction,” 220-22.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 216.

<sup>45</sup> Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

are outlined in *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*: firstly, that categories should not be forced on the data, rather, they should be allowed to emerge through the analytic process, and secondly, that in order to achieve this, the researcher should employ theoretical sensitivity, which is a skill-set that enables the researcher to reflect on data in a way that allows the emergence of the categories.<sup>46</sup>

The assumption behind this, of course, is the positivist, scientific belief that the researcher can remain value-neutral and solely analytical, bringing nothing of their own prior knowledge or judgment to the task of analysis. In paradoxical contrast, Glaser and Strauss expected researchers to demonstrate theoretical sensitivity, by drawing on their own experience and competence in approaching the data. Clearly, being theoretically sensitive must involve a degree of prior knowledge of the area being researched, together with an accumulation of experience and critical thinking in both the specific and wider area of research.<sup>47</sup> This paradox eventually became the subject of critical debate between Glaser and Strauss, and part of their theoretical divergence. Glaser continued to hold to the principle that categories emerge from data alone, while Strauss, and then Strauss and Corbin moved to a position arguing that the researcher's theoretical pre-knowledge affects and impacts on the analysis and interpretation of data.<sup>48</sup>

Central to this discussion is the role of the literature review in GTM. Birks and Mills contend that the place of the literature review is in fact "one of the most contentious and misunderstood aspects of this approach to research."<sup>49</sup> Glaser held, and continues to hold the position that a researcher should not carry out a substantive literature review

---

<sup>46</sup> See Udo Kelle, "The Development of Categories: Different Approaches in Grounded Theory," in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 193.

<sup>47</sup> See Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, "Introduction," 17.

<sup>48</sup> The differences between the two positions have been at the heart of the Glaser-Strauss separation and have been the subject of a great deal of academic debate. See Jo Reichertz, "Abduction," *ibid.*, 215. For discussion of the emergence-forcing debate, see, Glaser, *Emergence Vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*; Judy E. Boychuk Duchscher and Debra Morgan, "Grounded Theory: Reflections on the Emergence Vs. Forcing Debate," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 48, no. 6 (2004); J Kendall, "Axial Coding and the Grounded Theory Controversy," *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 21 (1999); Udo Kelle, "'Emergence' Vs. 'Forcing' of Empirical Data? A Crucial Problem of 'Grounded Theory' Reconsidered," *Forum : Qualitative Social Research* 6, no. 2 (2005); and S.I. Miller and F. Marcel, "How Does Grounded Theory Explain?" *Qualitative Health Research* 9 (1999).

<sup>49</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 22. For an excellent, short review of the central issues involved, see Antoinette McCallin, "Grappling with the Literature in a Grounded Theory Study," *Contemporary Nurse* 15, no. 1-2 (2003).

prior to the research, in order to avoid biasing the researcher in their approach to the data.<sup>50</sup> Broad reading around related areas is acceptable, but specific reading should not occur until after analysis. Strauss and Corbin diverged from this position,<sup>51</sup> leading Glaser to re-assert his rejection of early reading.<sup>52</sup> A significant part of this debate revolves around the need for many researchers to gain either funding or academic approval for their research proposals, which in most instances demands showing at least an introductory awareness of the literature. Perhaps more significant, however, is the researcher's theoretical and epistemological framework. Any perspective that removes the researcher from the role of 'expert outside advisor' acknowledges that the researcher does not enter the field in a neutral capacity: by participating in the research the researcher immediately has an impact on participants, on the presentation of data and on the analysis of that data. As such, any awareness that the researcher has from reading of the literature simply becomes a part of all that the researcher brings to the process. Rather than attempting to deny or ignore all such prior knowledge, it holds greater integrity for the researcher to acknowledge all prior knowledge, including what has been learned from the literature, right from the outset. As Birks and Mills suggest, "Acknowledging your existing assumptions, experience and knowledge of the area of research is an effective mechanism for establishing where you stand in relation to your proposed study. By articulating your thoughts, feelings and ideas before you begin, you ensure that your study is transparent from the outset..."<sup>53</sup> According to Birks and Mills, assumptions that should be included in this acknowledgement include the researcher's philosophical position and how this relates to the area of study, what they already know about the subject, what they expect to find from the research, and apprehensions, fears or concerns they might have regarding the process.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Birks and Mills discuss Glaser's six reasons for avoiding an early literature review: Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 23. Citing Barney G. Glaser, *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions* (Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1998), 67-68.

<sup>51</sup> Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research*.

<sup>52</sup> Glaser, *Emergence Vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. For a discussion of the arguments both for and against a substantial topic-related literature review at the start of a study, see Gerry McGhee, Glenn R. Marland, and Jacqueline Atkinson, "Grounded Theory Research: Literature Reviewing and Reflexivity," *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 60, no. 3 (2007).

<sup>53</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

### 3.2.3 METHODS

We turn now to consider the practical implications of carrying out a grounded theory study, in particular, the methods that need to be followed in order for the research to gain acceptance as a grounded theory study. We approach this section, however, cognizant of the fact that GTM does not comprise a rigidly set method and that any attempt to present such an approach runs the risk of losing some of the appeal of the method as a creative enterprise. The topics to be covered below are procedures to ease the process of theorizing, but do not, in and of themselves, constitute a set method. “Grounded theory is a way of thinking about data – process of conceptualization – of theorizing from data, so that the end result is a theory that the scientist produces from data collected by interviewing and observing everyday life.”<sup>55</sup> In what follows we will consider some general features of the method, moving in a later section to consider the specifics of a constructivist approach that will provide the methods used for this study.

#### 3.2.3.1 Interviewing

Glaser’s and Strauss’s original vision was that GTM could be applied equally to quantitative and qualitative methods of research. Although it has had some use within quantitative approaches, its primary application has developed as a qualitative research tool. As such, there are many sources of potential data that the researcher can use, for example, “...interviews, observations, videos, documents, drawings, diaries, memoirs, newspapers, biographies, historical documents, autobiographies...”<sup>56</sup> Although some of these sources may prove useful in providing additional material in the present study, the intention was to utilize interviews as the primary source of data. Grounded theorists are divided in their opinions as to whether to record interviews or not. Both Glaser and Strauss are not in favour of recording, whereas Charmaz is encouraging, especially as this later allows for transcription and the earliest phases of ‘line-by-line’ coding. Stern and Porr also write of the need for recording, but warn of the danger for inexperienced researchers of becoming overly concerned with getting the correct details of the

---

<sup>55</sup> Janice M. Morse, “Tussles, Tensions, and Resolutions,” in *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation*, ed. Janice M. Morse, et al. (Walnut Creek, CA.: Left Coast Press, 2009), 18. For a variety of different approaches to the methods of GTM, see for example the list of essential methods composed by Birks and Mills: Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 9. See also Hood, “Orthodoxy Vs. Power,” 154. See also Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 15. Here, Charmaz lists and discusses nine methods of GTM but contends that many people claiming to do grounded theory only complete the first five stages. We will discuss these later in this section.

<sup>56</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 27.

interview whilst losing sight of the wider context of what has been said, how it has been said, and what other information was being presented in non-verbal ways.<sup>57</sup> They encourage researchers to also take observational notes during interviews, noting any factors that will not be observed by a recording, and also encourage researchers to take time soon after interviews for reflective 'memo' writing to record their own reactions and responses to what has taken place during the interview.<sup>58</sup> One specific feature of grounded theory interviews is that questions, particularly in the early stages of research, should remain as general and unstructured as possible. In this regard, Corbin and Strauss write, "Our experience has demonstrated that perhaps the most data dense interviews are those that are unstructured; that is, they are not dictated by any predetermined set of questions."<sup>59</sup> Birks and Mills agree with this and suggest further that becoming locked into specific questions early in a study will draw criticism from reviewers experienced in grounded theory.<sup>60</sup> Backman and Kyngäs, referring to Glaser's contention that the researcher cannot know what questions are important at the outset of a study, suggest that questions should remain open enough to allow the researcher the freedom and flexibility to explore the phenomenon in depth.<sup>61</sup> As an illustration, Corbin and Strauss suggest the following as an opening question in a study looking at the ways that people are impacted by cancer: "Tell me about your experience with cancer? I want to hear the story in your own words..."<sup>62</sup>

### 3.2.3.2 Coding and Categorising

In GTM, data analysis begins as soon as the first interview is completed or the first data has been collected. This is an important distinction between GTM and other forms of qualitative analysis, where analysis may be delayed even until data collection is completed. The reason for this is that within GTM, information emerging in the early stages of analysis is allowed to inform and direct later stages of data collection and the subsequent ongoing analysis. Analysis in GTM proceeds by the researcher breaking the

---

<sup>57</sup> See Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 55-59.

<sup>58</sup> Stern and Porr cite Schatzman and Strauss who refer to three kinds of field notes: Observational notes, methodological notes and theoretical notes. L. Schatzman and A.L. Strauss, *Field Research* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973). Cited in Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 59-60.

<sup>59</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 27.

<sup>60</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 21.

<sup>61</sup> Backman and Kyngäs, "Challenges of the Grounded Theory Approach to a Novice Researcher," 149.

<sup>62</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 27.



data down, engaging in a process of analytic conceptualization and then putting the data back together in new ways. “The data give rise to the codes and the categories which combine the codes. The categories and hypotheses must be verified against the data by comparing the categories with each other...”<sup>63</sup> This process of coding involves close involvement in the data by the researcher, breaking the data down into small pieces, which are designated by ‘codes’ that the researcher believes are the best conceptual description of what is occurring in the data.<sup>64</sup> Corbin and Strauss explain that coding requires searching for a few words that best describe the concepts held within the data. This process requires abstract thinking and also demands that the researcher put aside pre-conceived ideas of what they are expecting to find.<sup>65</sup> Most usually, codes will be words that the researcher ascribes to represent a concept in the data, but on occasions, a phrase or term from a participant will be so powerfully descriptive that the researcher may choose to use it unchanged: in this case, it is termed an ‘in-vivo’ code. As codes begin to develop from the data, the researcher will also notice that groups of codes tend to relate together and point to a higher-level concept, which is then designated as a category. So the lower-level codes point the way to higher-level categories, but if these have been well crafted conceptually, “the higher-level concepts will rest on a solid foundation of lower-level concepts, which in turn go directly back to the data, bringing with them the detail and the power of description.”<sup>66</sup> Dey makes the critical point that this process involves the attitudes, skills and judgment of the researcher: “Thus categories are not simply generated by data, but through judgment in terms of some cognitive frame of reference by which we make sense of experience.”<sup>67</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> Backman and Kyngäs, “Challenges of the Grounded Theory Approach to a Novice Researcher,” 149.

<sup>64</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 160. The researcher needs to use a variety of analytic tools for this process of coding, and Corbin and Strauss usefully explore thirteen different strategies in some detail: *ibid.*, 67-85. Corbin and Strauss make it very clear that coding “... is more than just a paraphrasing. It is more than just noting concepts in the margins of the field notes or making a list of codes as in a computer program. It involves interacting with data (analysis) using techniques such as asking questions about the data, making comparisons between data, and so on, and in doing so, deriving concepts to stand for those data, then developing those concepts in terms of their properties and dimensions. A researcher can think of coding as ‘mining’ the data, digging beneath the surface to discover the hidden treasures contained within data.” *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>65</sup> See *ibid.*, 160.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>67</sup> Ian Dey, “Grounding Categories,” in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 170. Stern and Porr add to these practical skills that the objective of analysis is to “...transcend up from what you are seeing, hearing, sensing and reading about the phenomenon you are exploring to an abstract level. To make the transition from what’s happening at the concrete ground level to a higher conceptual level you start with substantive coding.” Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 64.

Different grounded theorists do have slightly different approaches to the processes of coding. Strauss has a three-stage division of “open”, “axial” and “selective” coding,<sup>68</sup> whereas Stern and Porr refer to “substantive coding” which is a two-stage process involving “open” and “selective” coding, which is then followed by “theoretical” coding.<sup>69</sup> Charmaz differs again, referring instead to “initial”, “focused” and “theoretical” coding.<sup>70</sup> Regardless of these differences, the common thread is that coding becomes more and more focused and specific as analysis proceeds, as the codes and categories begin to emerge and as the researcher achieves a progressively higher conceptual understanding of what is occurring in the data.

### 3.2.3.3 The Constant Comparative Method

Grounded theorists carry out data collection alongside, and at the same time as analysis proceeds. This is commonly referred to as the “Constant comparative method.”<sup>71</sup> The purpose behind this is that as data is analysed, codes and categories are formed that then inform the direction of future data gathering. Because of this, constant comparison always goes hand-in-hand with theoretical sampling, which will be examined in detail in a later section. Tesch describes constant comparison as the “main intellectual tool”<sup>72</sup> that underlies all analysis in grounded theory, because it is through comparing and contrasting codes, categories, memos, and unexpected events or findings that theoretical ideas are proposed and take shape. Boeije also reminds us that as new data is gathered and new categories are formed, constant comparison also reminds the researcher to compare old data with new, and early categories with new categories.<sup>73</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> See Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*.

<sup>69</sup> See Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 62-79.

<sup>70</sup> See Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 109-58.

<sup>71</sup> See for example Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*., Strauss, *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*., and Glaser, *Emergence Vs Forcing*. Note that Stern and Porr refer to this process as one of the four ‘ground rules’ of grounded theory, but refer to it as ‘The matrix operation’: “The grounded theory project is a matrix operation where everything goes on at once. The researcher collects data, then analyses this data, and then based on the analysis collects more data. This is referred to as the constant comparative method of analysis and is integral to the entire grounded theory *modus operandi*.” Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 44. Corbin and Strauss distinguish between two types of comparison-making: Constant Comparisons and Theoretical Comparisons. For discussion of these two types, see Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 73-75.

<sup>72</sup> R. Tesch, *Qualitative Research: Analysis Types and Software* (London: Falmer Press, 1990), 96.

<sup>73</sup> H. R. Boeije, “A Purposeful Approach to the Constant Comparative Method in the Analysis of Qualitative Interviews,” *Quality & Quantity* 36, no. 4 (2002): 393.

### 3.2.3.4 Memoing

Memos have been described as, “The critical lubricant of a grounded theory ‘machine’,”<sup>74</sup> and also as the mortar that holds together the building blocks of a developing theory.<sup>75</sup> The grounded theory researcher writes memos at all stages of the research process. These memos are written reflections on the process as it occurs, the data as it is gathered, the emerging analytic thoughts and process of the researcher, and reflections on the ways in which the research is impacting the researcher, and conversely, the ways in which the researcher is impacting the research.<sup>76</sup> Memos usually start at the beginning of a piece of research as quite simple, descriptive accounts of information and events, but as the process continues, they also become a record of the analytic thinking that the researcher is engaging in. Memos therefore store information for later retrieval and analysis, but they also function to provide a venue for analytic thinking to take place and for this thinking to be recorded for further analysis later. As a researcher sits to write, he or she is forced to think about the data, and it is in these thought processes that analysis occurs.<sup>77</sup> Birks et al. explain this process by writing that through the use of memos, “...the researcher is able to immerse themselves in the data, explore the meanings that this data holds, maintain continuity and sustain momentum...to articulate, explore, contemplate and challenge their interpretations when examining data...The result is the generation of theoretical assertions that are grounded in raw data, yet possess the quality of conceptual abstraction.”<sup>78</sup>

Birks et al. list the functions served by memos using the mnemonic ‘MEMO’: these are Mapping research activities; Extracting meaning from the data; Maintaining

---

<sup>74</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*, 40.

<sup>75</sup> Phyllis Noerager Stern, “On Solid Ground: Essential Properties for Growing Grounded Theory,” in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 119.

<sup>76</sup> Note that Corbin and Strauss also discuss diagrams as an additional tool to written memos. See Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 117. For practical suggestions regarding how to go about both written and diagrammatic memos, see the useful chapter: Lora Bex Lempert, “Asking Questions of the Data: Memo Writing in the Grounded Theory Tradition,” in *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 245-64.

<sup>77</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 117.

<sup>78</sup> Melanie Birks, Ysanne Chapman, and Karen Francis, “Memoing in Qualitative Research: Probing Data and Processes,” *Journal of Research in Nursing* 13, no. 1 (2008): 69-71. See also Stern and Porr, who explain the process in this way: “The mental calisthenics performed by the grounded theorist necessitates keeping careful records in the form of memoranda (or memos) which represent hunches about the data, theoretical ideas and new questions. Memo writing ignites conceptualization.” Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 66.

momentum; Opening communication.<sup>79</sup> Under the heading 'Maintaining momentum', they discuss a further important function of memos: that memo writing creates an opportunity for the researcher to be reflexive about the process they are engaged in. This means that memo writing provides the researcher with the opportunity to reflect on, and record for further reflection later, their own impact in the research process, both on the participants involved and also on the ways the data is collected and processed. In doing so, the researcher acknowledges their impact on the research, which is an important step towards the honest awareness and acceptance of the way the researcher subjectively influences the research process. As Birks et al. suggest, "In essence the researcher extracts meaning from the data by filtering it through their own interpretive processes. As such the researcher is the instrument in qualitative research and their perspective establishes...the context of the study."<sup>80</sup> Memo writing acknowledges the impact of the researcher, which is the first step needed in working with the bias that this can otherwise introduce. In doing grounded theory, the researcher brings all his or her personal and professional experience, skills and attitudes to the analytic process. By acknowledging these through memo writing, all this informs and becomes part of the data. In doing so, researcher bias is not so much avoided as acknowledged and integrated into the analysis. As Stern and Porr express this, "Through openness and sensitivity to emerging concepts, continual back and forth analytic comparisons, and constant modification and confirmation with participants, you avoid allowing pet assumptions or ideas to slip in; and in essence, bias is controlled."<sup>81</sup>

### 3.2.3.5 Theoretical Sampling

As described earlier, GTM involves a process of concurrent data collection and analysis, whereby analysis of data begins as soon as the first set of data is collected. The reason for this is that the theoretical ideas and categories that emerge from the data then direct the researcher to the next phase of the research by suggesting questions to ask, particular participants to involve, or other sources of data to investigate. Glaser suggested that theoretical sampling occurs when "...the analyst jointly collects, codes, and analyzes his data and decides what data to collect next and where to find them, in

---

<sup>79</sup> For a discussion of these four factors, see Birks, Chapman, and Francis, "Memoing in Qualitative Research: Probing Data and Processes," 70.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>81</sup> Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 51.

order to develop his theory as it emerges.”<sup>82</sup> In other words, “Concepts are derived from data during analysis and questions about those concepts drive the next round of data collection.”<sup>83</sup> Theoretical sampling is distinguished from selective sampling, the selection of certain target groups prior to data collection,<sup>84</sup> firstly by the timing, which in the case of theoretical sampling occurs throughout the research process, and secondly by the nature of the drivers behind the sampling. In traditional qualitative research, selective sampling is planned at the outset, in response to prior researcher expectations, whereas in GTM, theoretical sampling is directed during the research by the emerging categories and theoretical ideas. In this way, GTM can be thought of as a spiral of ongoing research activities, rather than as a linear series of steps to be completed. Corbin and Strauss describe this iterative process in this way: “Data collection leads to analysis. Analysis leads to concepts. Concepts generate questions. Questions lead to more data collection so that the researcher might learn more about those concepts.”<sup>85</sup> This process continues until a point is reached where all concepts under consideration have been well defined and explained, and where no new and surprising data emerges. This is referred to as the point of ‘saturation’ and is the point where no new data needs to be gathered.<sup>86</sup> The idea of saturation leads to some difficulty in planning studies using GTM, because at the outset it is not possible to predict how much data gathering will be required in order to achieve saturation. For example, in an interview-based GTM study, interviews need to continue until saturation is reached and no new data is emerging, but the number of interviews required to achieve this will vary from study to study.

### 3.2.3.6 Core Category Development

An important feature in Glaserian grounded theory is the emergence of a core category, or core variable, that “encapsulates and explains the grounded theory as a whole.”<sup>87</sup> According to Glaser, a researcher selects a core category from among the many categories that are developed during the course of an investigation. This core category will have “analytic power” which is “the ability to explain ‘theoretically’ what the

---

<sup>82</sup> Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*, 36.

<sup>83</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 144.

<sup>84</sup> See Claire B. Draucker et al., “Theoretical Sampling and Category Development in Grounded Theory,” *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 8 (2007): 1137-38.

<sup>85</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 144.

<sup>86</sup> See *ibid.* For further discussion of saturation, particularly around the question as to when sampling should stop, see Dey, “Grounding Categories,” 185-86. See also Janice M. Morse, “Sampling in Grounded Theory,” 241-43.

<sup>87</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 12.

research is all about.”<sup>88</sup> However, it should be noted at this point that other significant theorists place much less emphasis on the core category: notably, Charmaz is dismissive of the notion of a core category and as I will be using constructivist methodology following Charmaz, we need not further explore the notion of core categories.<sup>89</sup>

### 3.2.3.7 Theoretical Construction and Integration

A central principal of GTM is that research should not be simply descriptive, but instead should result in construction of theory.<sup>90</sup> Theory construction depends on the development of the core category as discussed above. It is dependent on moving from being purely descriptive towards being explanatory. It is through the whole grounded theory iterative process of thinking deeply about data, forming codes and categories, writing memos about these and about the researcher’s own processes of analysis, that integration occurs and theory is constructed with the power to explain what has been occurring. Constructing theory requires the acquisition of theoretical sensitivity, that characteristic of a researcher that stands in contrast to objectivity. Corbin and Strauss suggest that, “Sensitivity means having insight, being tuned in to, being able to pick up on relevant issues, events, and happenings in data. It means being able to present the view of participants and taking the role of the other through immersion in data.”<sup>91</sup> So the development of theory is dependent at least in part on the characteristics and abilities of the researcher. While there are a number of skills and tools that can be learned in this regard,<sup>92</sup> it is also true that theory development is not simply a process of following certain logical steps in order to produce the theory. In keeping with the principle of abduction, theory development requires openness to thinking outside the square. Charmaz suggests: “Theoretical playfulness enters in. Whimsy and wonder can lead you

---

<sup>88</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 104.

<sup>89</sup> On this subject, Charmaz writes for example, “Occasionally you may see an explicit core category in an early interview...Was the category I identified then the only important one in the coded data? No. I have developed several other major codes...” Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014), 107.

<sup>90</sup> Note however that in recent years, theorists such as Corbin and Strauss have moved away from Glaser and Strauss’s original position to state that final theory construction may not be the aim for all researchers. They acknowledge the influence of narrative approaches and the telling of stories as recent developments that have moved away from the drive for theory development, and yet still argue for the need for theory development: “A person has to wonder where the world would be if there were only ‘stories’ and no ‘theories’. We probably would never have put a man on the moon...” Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 55.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>92</sup> See for example “Defining and developing theoretical sensitivity”: Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory : A Practical Guide*, 59-63. See also “Techniques for Achieving Theoretical Integration”: Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 103-13.

to see the novel in the mundane. Openness to the unexpected expands your view of studied life and subsequently of theoretical possibilities.”<sup>93</sup>

### 3.2.3.8 Criteria for Rigor

As with all research, an important question in GTM regards how we can know that a study has been carried out in such a manner that its results reflect the rigor of the approach and consequently show a high degree of authenticity. Within the positivist tradition, this would normally be referred to as a question of validity, and of course the early development of GTM, in response to positivist, quantitative expectations, proposed a number of ways in which GTM and its resulting grounded theories, could also be judged as having met suitable standards of rigor. According to Glaser and Strauss, and later Glaser, the criteria for measuring the rigor of a grounded theory study include ‘fit’, ‘relevance’, ‘work’ and ‘modifiability’.<sup>94</sup> In brief, ‘fit’ relates to the need for theory to emerge rather than being forced. The researcher must not force data to fit “predetermined ideas, problems, or solutions.”<sup>95</sup> The criterion of ‘relevance’ refers to accurate identification of the core issue and process at work in the area under study. ‘Work’ regards the ability of the newly developed theory to have practical application, by being able to interpret situations it is applied to. Finally, ‘modifiability’ is a criterion that refers more to the willingness of the researcher to be open to ongoing development of their work, with resultant changes to their theory. In contrast to these four criteria, Corbin and Strauss outline a more extensive list of ten criteria, including ‘fit’, ‘applicability’, ‘concepts’, ‘contextualisation of concepts’, ‘logic’, ‘depth’, ‘variation’, ‘creativity’, ‘sensitivity’ and ‘memos’.<sup>96</sup> These criteria have been critiqued, however, on the basis that they are the outworkings of a post-positivist theoretical perspective that grounded theory has always tried to avoid. Hall and Callery’s critique suggests that all the criteria suggested above “...are problematic because they assume that a natural world is available for observation and analysis.”<sup>97</sup> In particular, Hall and Callery’s concern is that such criteria for rigor seem to treat data primarily as correct

---

<sup>93</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 245.

<sup>94</sup> As outlined in Glaser and Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*. Glaser later developed these in Glaser, *Theoretical Sensitivity*. For a brief discussion of the four criteria, also see Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 75-78. For an excellent summary table of the criteria suggested by Glaser and Strauss, Glaser, Strauss and Corbin, and Charmaz, see Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 149.

<sup>95</sup> Stern and Porr, *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*, 75.

<sup>96</sup> Corbin and Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research*, 305-07.

<sup>97</sup> Wendy A. Hall and Peter Callery, “Enhancing the Rigor of Grounded Theory: Incorporating Reflexivity and Relationality,” *Qualitative Health Research* 11 (2001): 260.

representations of reality, and that the criteria have been proposed as standards to check the correct technical procedures have been followed in order to achieve the required outcomes.<sup>98</sup> Such an approach seems to be contrary to the principles of symbolic interactionism, with the focus more clearly on the process, the individuals involved and the interactions between participants and the researcher. Hall and Callery claim that question of rigor needs to be re-examined in light of the epistemological claims of a constructivist approach to GTM. We will be following up on this suggestion in a later section.

Birks and Mills have similar concerns regarding establishing quality in GTM, and also suggest that the commonly proposed criteria for validity have traditionally been a response to the dominant expectations of positivist-oriented quantitative research for evidence of validity and reliability. In particular, their concern with the tendency to apply quantitative measures of rigor to the qualitative setting is because, in the case of GTM, “it is ultimately processes that determine the relevance and value of data.”<sup>99</sup> In response to these concerns, Birks and Mills propose a three-stage approach to evaluating grounded theory research. Stage one is a ‘Prima facie’ evaluation, which is simply the experience of evaluating a work at face value for an overall feel regarding its quality. Stage two involves application of the criteria from one of the classic approaches of Glaser, Strauss and Corbin or Charmaz.<sup>100</sup> Stage three involves the additional application of what they term ‘Comprehensive evaluation’, which includes consideration of three factors they consider influence the quality of GTM research through their effect on the process or conduct of the research. These three factors are ‘researcher expertise’, ‘methodological congruence’ and ‘procedural precision’.<sup>101</sup> Because it is so important to achieve a quality result, and because of the value of Birks and Mills’ questions, their criteria for evaluating grounded theory research are included here in full:

---

<sup>98</sup> See *ibid.*, 259-60.

<sup>99</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 147.

<sup>100</sup> Birks and Mills do note the strong difference between the first two editions of *Basics of Qualitative Research* and the third: for Strauss and Corbin, there are three or four essential criteria for evaluating quality, but in the third edition by Corbin and Strauss this had expanded to ten basic criteria with an additional thirteen criteria. *Ibid.*, 149.

<sup>101</sup> Birks and Mills discuss these factors in chapter 3 of their book and then return to include them in the discussion in chapter 9 of evaluation strategies for GTM. See chapter 3: Birks, Chapman, and Francis, “Memoing in Qualitative Research,” 33-44.



Table 1: Criteria for evaluating grounded theory research

Researcher Expertise	<p>Does the researcher demonstrate skills in scholarly writing?</p> <p>Is there evidence that the researcher is familiar with grounded theory methods?</p> <p>Has the researcher accessed and presented citations of relevant methodological resources?</p> <p>Are limitations in the study design and research process acknowledged and addressed where possible?</p>
Methodological Congruence	<p>Has the researcher articulated their philosophical position?</p> <p>Is grounded theory an appropriate research strategy for the stated aims of the study?</p> <p>Do the outcomes of the research achieve the stated aims?</p> <p>Is a grounded theory presented as the end product of the research?</p> <p>Are philosophical and methodological inconsistencies identified and addressed?</p>
Procedural Precision	<p>Is there evidence that the researcher has employed memoing in support of the study?</p> <p>Has the researcher indicated the mechanisms by which an audit trail was maintained?</p> <p>Are procedures described for the management of data and resources?</p> <p>Is there evidence that the researcher has applied the essential grounded theory methods appropriately in the context of the study described?</p> <p>Does the researcher make logical connections between the data and abstractions?</p> <p>Is there evidence that the theory is grounded in the data?</p> <p>Is the final theory credible? Are potential applications examined and explored?<sup>102</sup></p>

### 3.3 CONSTRUCTIVIST GROUNDED THEORY

As a novice GTM researcher seeking to understand the methodology for the purposes of this research, I discovered fairly quickly that I felt a greater affinity with some approaches than others. In particular, approaches and methods aligned with the pragmatist roots made more sense and seemed to have a greater resonance with my own philosophical positioning. Although my initial undergraduate study in the sciences was an early introduction to positivist approaches to research, more recent life experience

---

<sup>102</sup> *ibid.*, 153-54.

and postgraduate training as a Counsellor increased my awareness of the multiple complexities involved in peoples' understanding of themselves and their realities, and made me aware that in social science research the researcher plays a significant role, through being included in the process of the research. Initially then, I found myself leaning toward a "Straussian" version of GTM. As I continued reading, however, I found that various other versions of GTM have been proposed, and the development of constructivist grounded theory held even more appeal for me considering my background and philosophical leanings. Constructivist grounded theory has been largely driven by second-generation grounded theorist Kathy Charmaz, in conjunction with Anthony Bryant.<sup>103</sup> In what follows, I will be outlining the specific approach of constructivist grounded theory, explaining how it fits with my approach as a researcher, and giving examples from the current research to illustrate the way constructivist grounded theory informed my approach to the research.

### 3.3.1 PHILOSOPHICAL FRAMEWORK

As I have outlined above, despite the early intention of the founders of GTM to steer the method away from the positivist, scientific paradigms of the time, some versions of the methodology still operate with positivist undertones. In particular, critics of traditional GTM point to its focus on 'data', the 'emergence of theory', claims of being 'good science' and the development of systems to structure and define the GTM process, as being reflective of the desire to be a worthy alternative to quantitative research, but still beholden to the demands of positivism.<sup>104</sup> Also of concern is the intention for the researcher to hold an isolated and passive stance that keeps them from being actively engaged with the context and subjects of their research. Such critics point to these epistemological inconsistencies and contend that "...we must distinguish between what is key to the method, and what needs to be discarded or reformulated if the method is to shake off its reputation for being positivist, philosophically naïve, and a refuge for the methodologically indecisive."<sup>105</sup> Bryant contends, however, that despite these issues, GTM still holds strong potential to fulfill its intentions as an alternative to positivist

---

<sup>103</sup> Other developments from GTM include Schatzman's Dimensional Analysis and Clarke's Situational Analysis. See for example, L. Schatzman, "Dimensional Analysis: Notes on an Alternative Approach to the Grounding of Theory in Qualitative Research," in *Social Organisation and Social Process: Essays in Honor of Anselm Strauss*, ed. D.R. Maines (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991). Also; Adele E. Clarke, *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).

<sup>104</sup> See Bryant, "Re-Grounding Grounded Theory," 34.

<sup>105</sup> Bryant and Charmaz, "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective," 49.

research options. In referring to the work of Strauss and Corbin, he points to a number of intended characteristics of the original formulation of GTM, including “the ability to step back and critically analyze situations, recognition of the tendency toward bias, and the ability to think abstractly.”<sup>106</sup> Bryant suggests that by reformulating GTM around epistemological developments of recent decades, GTM can be rediscovered as a methodology that is consistent with its epistemological roots and claims. Bryant suggests,

A repositioned GTM...builds on the fluid, interactive, and emergent research process of its originators but seeks to recognize partial knowledge, multiple perspectives, diverse positions, uncertainties, and variation in both empirical experience and its theoretical rendering...assumes that any rendering is just that: a *representation* of experience, not a replication of it.<sup>107</sup>

The constructivist approach to GTM first arose in the writing of Kathy Charmaz, in a contribution to the *Handbook of Qualitative Research*.<sup>108</sup> Here, Charmaz distinguished between objectivist and constructivist approaches to grounded theory, where objectivism defines many of the early formulations of the approach. In drawing a harsh distinction between objectivist and constructivist approaches, Charmaz tends to obscure the contributions of early grounded theorists such as Leonard Schatzman, who demonstrates the fact that a number of the early theorists avoided the constraints of objectivism and maintained allegiance to the principles of the pragmatist and symbolic interactionist roots of the Chicago School.<sup>109</sup> According to Charmaz, objectivist approaches are characterized as assuming an external reality that is waiting to be discovered by unbiased observers who record facts about that reality.<sup>110</sup> In responding to this position, Charmaz developed the constructivist approach, which “assumes

---

<sup>106</sup> Bryant, “Re-Grounding Grounded Theory,” 35. Bryant is referring to Anselm L. Strauss and Juliet M. Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques* (Newbury Park: Sage, 1998), 7.

<sup>107</sup> Bryant and Charmaz, “Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective,” 51. (Emphasis in original). See also Charmaz, who writes “...constructivist grounded theory is a 21st century form of the method that begins with inductive inquiry, adopts a comparative logic, invokes abductive reasoning, and emphasizes interaction throughout the research process. Constructivist grounded theory loosens the method from its positivist roots, moves it into interpretive inquiry, and preserves and enhances its pragmatist heritage.” Kathy Charmaz, “The Legacy of Anselm Strauss in Constructivist Grounded Theory,” *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 32 (2008): 132-33.

<sup>108</sup> Kathy Charmaz, “Grounded Theory Methodology: Objectivist and Constructivist Qualitative Methods,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000).

<sup>109</sup> See for example Schatzman, “Dimensional Analysis.”

<sup>110</sup> See Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 131. See also Charmaz, “Shifting the Grounds,” 138.

multiple realities - and multiple perspectives on those realities.”<sup>111</sup> Consequently, data is seen as relative and theory is seen as a co-construction involving both participants and researcher. This process is, of necessity, fundamentally interactive, demanding a reflexive approach from the grounded theorist, and acknowledgement of how their own understandings, backgrounds and approach influence the relationship, analytic process, and subsequent construction of their interpretation of what they have observed.<sup>112</sup> The constructivist grounded theorist is open to acknowledging the complexities of their research topic, and will present their analysis as “problematic, relativistic, situational and partial.”<sup>113</sup>

In these respects, a constructivist approach lines up clearly with the early pragmatist and symbolic interactionist ambitions for grounded theory. Charmaz claims this congruence, proposing that both constructivism and pragmatism “assume a multiplicity of perspectives, view reality as consisting of emergent processes, address how people handle practical problems in their worlds, and see facts and values as joined.”<sup>114</sup> In choosing a methodological approach for this study, the philosophical underpinnings expressed by Charmaz’s constructivist approach appealed to me as a researcher for three reasons. This appeal is of course of prime importance as it is essential to be using a methodology that is philosophically aligned with one’s own experience of, and approach to life. In addition to the oft-stated rule that GTM is particularly useful where there is little existing research on a topic, I was struck first by the constructivist acceptance of multiple perspectives and realities. This acceptance aligns with my own experience as a researcher exploring the different perspectives that people have regarding both their views of God and their understandings of lived experience. There is also an interesting synergy with the perspective expressed in the previous chapter that Scripture can speak with different, and equally valid voices, to different people at different times. This acceptance is central to this research, given that I am exploring an area of belief where theological reflection has concluded that there is no single perspective on the atonement that has been accepted by the church. Secondly, I am well aware of the complexity of

---

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> See *ibid.*, 138-46. For further discussion, see Jane Mills, Ann Bonner, and Karen Francis, “The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory,” *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 1 (2006): 5-6.

<sup>113</sup> Charmaz, “Shifting the Grounds,” 138. Charmaz here includes an excellent table comparing and contrasting positivist and pragmatist underpinnings of grounded theory. See *ibid.*, 139.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 140. See here also for another excellent table comparing and contrasting the assumptions, objectives and implications for data analysis of objectivist and constructivist approaches.

the topic I am researching and am pleased that constructivist grounded theory acknowledges this reality. When dealing with matters of faith there are many levels of meaning and awareness that need to be taken into account. Questions about the death of Christ might appeal to some participants at a purely intellectual level, while others may engage more in an affective response. Participants may be aware of the source of their beliefs, but at the same time there are multiple experiences that will have contributed to their response to the cross, and some of these may not even be accessible to memory. The third source of appeal is the central significance within constructivist GT of the principle of co-construction of theory and the place of the researcher as a co-constructor of the stories told by participants. Throughout the course of the study, through interviewing and then on to analysis of transcripts, I have been consistently aware of the impact that I have had on the information given by participants and the meaning that I have given the words they have offered. It is, in my opinion, impossible to avoid the reality that I have impacted on, arranged and even altered the intended contributions from each of my participants. Constructivist GTM acknowledges this reality and through active awareness and acceptance of it seeks to mitigate the impact it might otherwise have.

### 3.3.2 A QUESTION OF ONTOLOGY

Mills, Bonner and Francis make the claim that constructivist grounded theory is “ontologically relativist and epistemologically subjectivist”,<sup>115</sup> which takes an additional step from the well-established epistemological foundations of constructivist grounded theory into the dimension of ontology. While welcoming a subjectivist epistemology, however, I found the claim of relativist ontology hard to accept. While I recognize that a degree of subjectivity attends all our thinking, this need not entail a thoroughgoing relativism. Christian theology in particular is concerned to uphold the objective reality of God’s action in Christ even while recognizing that our perception of that reality is always shaped by subjective factors. Consequently, I agree with Crotty, who suggests that the boundaries between epistemology and ontology are often inappropriately blurred, and that we need to be clearer in defining which realm we are making claims about. Andrews agrees with this potential for confusion, but is himself clear that

---

<sup>115</sup> Mills, Bonner, and Francis, “The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory,” 6.

“...social constructionism as discussed by Berger and Luckman (1991)”<sup>116</sup> is simply dealing with the epistemological matter of the social construction of knowledge, which therefore makes no ontological claims. In a similar way, Crotty allows that, “Realism in ontology and constructionism in epistemology turn out to be quite compatible.”<sup>117</sup> On this basis, Crotty’s framework for understanding research excludes ontological considerations. Consequently, the methodology of this research adopts a constructivist epistemology without committing to a relativist ontology. In a practical sense, I accept that some participants in this study may wish to make ontological claims, that they have the right to do so, and that the constructivist epistemology to be used here does not in any way exclude such claims.

### 3.3.3 METHODOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES

#### 3.3.3.1 Position of the Researcher

One of the most significant effects of the constructivist turn concerns the role of the researcher and how this is perceived. In constructivism, the researcher is not an expert, external and detached observer. Rather, the researcher becomes involved in the process on the inside and becomes actively engaged with participants. Constructivist grounded theory is therefore a “profoundly *interactive* process.”<sup>118</sup> Bryant describes this approach to the role of the researcher as “actor-in-context”, whereby the researcher actively participates in the process rather than passively observing. The corollary is that research then needs to be seen less as a search for truth and more as the development of understanding and “adequate models for specified purposes.”<sup>119</sup> Within this framework of understanding, interviews are seen not as a value-free and context-free way of gathering data, but rather as the “site for interplay between two people that leads to data that is negotiated and contextual.”<sup>120</sup> Researchers are seen to contribute, along with participants, to the generation of the data. Because of this, it is critical for the constructivist grounded theorist to maintain high levels of reflexivity, that is, self-

---

<sup>116</sup> Tom Andrews, “What Is Social Constructionism?” *The Grounded Theory Review* 11, no. 1 (2012). Andrews is referring here to Berger and Luckman, who were influenced in their work by George Herbert Mead, amongst others. See P. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Penguin, 1991).

<sup>117</sup> Crotty, *The Foundations of Social Research*, 11.

<sup>118</sup> Charmaz, “Shifting the Grounds,” 138. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>119</sup> Bryant, “Re-Grounding Grounded Theory,” 35.

<sup>120</sup> Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 56.

reflection on their role, their impact on the process of interviewing and on the participants themselves, the presuppositions and expectations that they might bring to the research process, and the ways in which these factors might affect the analysis. Without high levels of reflexivity, the researcher is likely to remain unaware of their impact on participants, interview process and analysis, which would be very harmful for any developing theory.<sup>121</sup>

Acceptance of this principle leads to the need to be clear about my own presuppositions that I bring to the role of researcher. I have found a need to reflect often, and at length about the beliefs that I have held about the topic under consideration, together with the ways that these beliefs impact on the process of interviewing others. Some of these presuppositions have been explored through the GT process of memoing, some have been explored in formal supervision and some have been explored in conversation with trusted colleagues. My personal background includes a career spanning nearly thirty-five years in the fields of education, counselling and church pastoral work. At times I am aware that I bring 'the instructor' nature of my work as a science teacher into my relationships, and I need to be cognizant of the impact this might have on others. I have also completed post-graduate qualifications as a counsellor, and so at times, particularly in the interview setting where I have been listening to participants' stories, I have been aware that my empathic responses have at times obscured a more analytic hearing of what has been said, consequently missing opportunities to ask incisive questions. I have also completed post-graduate studies in theology, worked in a pastoral role in a large Anglican church, and have strong opinions and beliefs about various theological subjects. Of particular relevance are the beliefs that I hold about the atonement, and the dissatisfaction I have with the commonly expressed evangelical view of penal substitution. Interviewing participants who expressed ideas and opinions directly opposed to my own thinking, I had to be particularly careful to conduct the interviews in a neutral and yet encouraging way, facilitating the process so that participants could express themselves without judgment, and keeping my own inclination to express an alternative perspective in check. An example of this type of material is included in this contribution from one participant:

---

<sup>121</sup> See Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 130. The most powerful strategy for maintaining reflexivity is the process of memoing. Memoing remains of the key characteristics of constructivist grounded theory and the primary method for the researcher to constantly reflect on their work and process.

I believe that Jesus was punished for that, I believe that God punished Jesus for that, ah, in terms of um, the wrath that should've been directed at me, did get directed at Christ, and so that effectively paid the penalty so... (Interview 10/4/2).

Following this interview I wrote a memo reflecting on the impact the interview had on me, an excerpt of which said:

Came out of this interview absolutely staggered at the thought processes of this participant. Amazing that someone can believe with such conviction some of the things that this man does – and yet it seems to work for him...if I'm interested in well-being in response to theology, then everything seems well here and pretty balanced! I can't get my head around what he is believing, it seems so far off where I stand, but how can I criticize his perspective? (Memo 10/1).

My hope is, that by being aware of my own responses to participants' views, by managing those responses through memoing, discussions, and simply through the awareness itself, that I was able in the interviews to at least minimize the impact of my own views. It would be impossible to have no impact at all, and I was also aware that in interviews with participants with whom I felt more affinity, I no doubt encouraged their contribution all the more. My hope is that the wide range of responses from participants is indicative of the fact that they all felt safe, and were free to present what was important to them; that while I no doubt had an influence on the process, the data was a fair reflection of participants' intent. Nevertheless, in a constructivist spirit I acknowledge that the data gathered is a co-construction from my time spent with participants and then time spent in the data during analysis.

### 3.3.3.2 Induction and Abduction

Constructivist grounded theory fully acknowledges both the inductive and abductive elements of the process as outlined earlier. The specific contribution of constructivists to these dimensions of the approach is to clearly link induction and abduction to the pragmatist roots of grounded theory. On a practical level, the process of inductive thinking was a challenge for me as a novice grounded theorist. Faced with large quantities of transcribed materials, I found that my immediate urge was to get involved in the detail of the information, making lists of the facts presented by participants and categorizing these lists based on observed features. This type of reasoning is reflective of my early training and some features of my way of thinking, but was not helpful for



induction. In contrast to my early attempts, the inductive process leaves behind the “facts” of the words on the page by looking for concepts that are at a higher level of abstraction. For someone used to looking for detail, to refocus on abstract concepts was a new challenge. Guidance from my grounded theory supervisor in the form of conversation and brainstorming at the whiteboard, together with the interesting conversations at a GT discussion group at the Auckland University of Technology, all helped to shift my awareness so that I could look for concepts and abstractions rather than details. I also became aware, on a number of occasions, of the logic of abduction. I experienced this as a ‘lightbulb moment,’ when a moment of clarity happened, making sense of something that had previously been confusing. Some of these abductions will be presented as I continue to explain the process of data collection and analysis.

### 3.3.3.3 Emergence vs Forcing

In constructivist grounded theory, the debate around emergence vs forcing has to be seen in the context of the position of the researcher as an active participant in the research. In this light, theory cannot simply emerge, unaffected by a researcher who has completed no literature review, has no prior experience of the topic under consideration, and is able to keep their attitudes and opinions carefully concealed. Neither, however, is there risk that the developing theory will be forced in a particular direction by the unexamined presuppositions or bias of the researcher. The constructivist grounded theorist must acknowledge all aspects of their role in the research, acknowledging prior knowledge and experience and as far as possible also acknowledging whatever biases exist. Through open examination of all these matters, the emergence vs forcing debate becomes a far less demanding issue. In considering the place of the literature review, Charmaz’s discussion focuses less on the timing of the literature review, and more on the sophistication, extent and rigor of engagement with the literature. Charmaz encourages researchers to engage with the literature in a critical and analytic fashion in ways that are appropriate to the context of the research being carried out.<sup>122</sup>

As I have indicated above, as a researcher I bring an extensive background of both academic and practical experience to this research, which will no doubt impact on both the way I carry out the interviews, the approach I bring to the analytical work and the

---

<sup>122</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 306-10.

types of conclusions I am likely to draw. Following Bryant and Charmaz, my background and experience means that I should have a high degree of theoretical sensitivity.<sup>123</sup> Over the years, and in preparation for this research, I have read widely in the literature on topics related to this thesis. This reading includes theological writing on the atonement, psychological writing on matters of human well-being, emotional adjustment and theories of personality, together with a range of literature on the subject of the integration of psychology and theology. Having said that, I have found very little literature specifically addressing the question of the impact of a specific theological belief on an individual's experience of life. It is worth stating at this point that my expectation in the initial stages of this research was that there would be a clear correlation between a person's beliefs and the way they reported on their experience of life. Specifically, it was my expectation that if an individual reported that they believed in a view of the atonement that pointed to a harsh, punitive and angry God, I expected that this view of God would have wider impact on the person's understanding of their relationship with God, understanding of people and wider view of the ordering of the world. This expectation was partly based on my own personal feelings and images of God, and also partly based on literature I have read that indicates that beliefs in a punitive God are more likely linked with levels of psychological dysfunction.<sup>124</sup> The model of the atonement most usually associated with views of God as angry and judgmental is penal substitutionary theory, and so one of my early expectations was that participants who hold these views will be more likely to see God as angry, vengeful and judging, and will subsequently experience outcomes in their lives related to this perspective of God.

### 3.3.4 METHODS

All of the basic methods outlined earlier are also useful procedures for the constructivist grounded theorist. However, in constructivist grounded theory, carrying out the methods should express a constructivist epistemology through the methodological framework utilised. We turn now to consider the impact that constructivism has on some of the key methods to be used, and to outline the specific approaches taken to the carrying out of this research.

---

<sup>123</sup> Bryant and Charmaz, "Introduction: Grounded Theory Research," 17.

<sup>124</sup> See Chapter 1 for a fuller discussion of this literature, for example, see Brokaw and Edwards, "The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations."

### 3.3.4.1 Interviewing

Charmaz advocates the use of what she terms “Intensive interviewing.”<sup>125</sup> Intensive interviewing is a flexible approach that allows in-depth exploration of participants’ experiences, aims to elicit detailed responses to open-ended questions, places emphasis on understanding the participants’ perspectives and experience, and remains open to later follow-up on unexpected answers and unanticipated responses.<sup>126</sup> In constructivist grounded theory, interviews begin with broad, open-ended questions that will later become more focused, in order to explore particular aspects raised by participants. It is through non-judgmental and open questions that the researcher invites unexpected statements and stories to emerge in the interviews.<sup>127</sup>

A constructivist approach acknowledges that all interviews result only in a construction of reality, rather than a reproduction of the prior reality of the participant. The interviewer is also involved in this co-construction of the participant’s expressed reality, and must remain cognizant of this fact. Charmaz discusses a number of recent critiques of interviews, including the claim that because interviews are retrospective, they may not be an accurate representation of actual events or attitudes.<sup>128</sup> In addition, research participants may “downplay negative events and experiences during the interview”,<sup>129</sup> or, “...following some unstated convention, respondent and interviewer both default to a mode of self-presentation of pre-emptive closure, one that side-steps uncomfortable issues and rides roughshod over inconsistencies.”<sup>130</sup> An additional concern in the present study is that respondents may well either chose, or fall unwittingly into answering questions with rhetoric from one of the many common sources of Christian belief, including Scripture, church liturgy or songs and hymns, rather than answering candidly from their own experience. The benefit of the constructivist approach is that rather than

---

<sup>125</sup> See Charmaz’s chapter on this topic: Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 55-83.

<sup>126</sup> See *ibid.*, 56-57.

<sup>127</sup> For a list of possible questions to ask at various stages of the interview process, see *ibid.*, 66-67. For a further, excellent list of ‘Do’s’ and ‘Don’ts’ of intensive interviews, see *ibid.*, 70-71.

<sup>128</sup> See for example: P. Atkinson and D. Silverman, “Kundera’s Immortality: The Interview Society and the Invention of the Self,” *Qualitative Enquiry* 3, no. 3 (1997).; J. Potter and A. Hepburn, “Eight Challenges for Interview Researchers,” in *Handbook of Interview Research*, ed. J. Gubrium, et al. (Los Angeles: Sage, 2012).; and P.K. Yanos and K. Hopper, “On ‘False, Collusive Objectification’: Becoming Attended to Self-Censorship, Performance and Interviewer Biases in Qualitative Interviewing,” *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, no. 3 (2008).

<sup>129</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 80.

<sup>130</sup> Yanos and Hopper, “On ‘False, Collusive Objectification’,” 230. Cited in Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 80.

viewing the interview as a representation of reality, the constructivist, "...attend(s) to the situation and construction of the interview, the construction of the research participant's story and silences, and the interviewer-participant relationship as well as the explicit content of the interview...what participants do not say can be as telling as what they do say."<sup>131</sup>

#### 3.3.4.1.1 *Participant selection rationale*

A decision was made in the early stages of planning this research to limit the participants to those located within the evangelical church. Evangelicalism is a movement in the Protestant church that has roots in the revival of spiritual vigor in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Evangelical churches today exist in many different denominations, but are characterized by belief in the Bible as the infallible word of God, the need to spread the Gospel of Christ through mission work, and the need for individuals to experience personal salvation through faith in Christ.<sup>132</sup> An example of the evangelical understanding of atonement is found in the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, which states,

God himself provided the way out of the human dilemma by allowing his only Son, Jesus Christ, to assume the penalty and experience death on man's behalf. Christ made atonement for sin on Calvary's cross by shedding his blood, thereby redeeming man from the power of spiritual death by dying in his place. Christ's substitutionary or vicarious atonement was a ransom for mankind's sins, a defeat of the powers of darkness, and a satisfaction for sin because it met the demand of God's justice.<sup>133</sup>

Though it would be fascinating to extend the research to include participants from liberal Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox backgrounds, limitations of time indicated the need to restrict participants to a more select group. Central to this decision also was my own concern with penal substitutionary theory, which is most strongly held within evangelical churches. The decision was made to advertise in churches that self-identify as evangelical, with the hope being that respondents would also fit within the range of beliefs typical within evangelical churches. Accordingly, I contacted by phone and email the pastors or ministers at a range of evangelical churches in a major New Zealand city. Those who agreed to participate placed a small advertisement in their church

---

<sup>131</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 91.

<sup>132</sup> For a discussion of the origins, development and characteristics of evangelicalism, see Pierard, "Evangelicalism," 379-82.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 379.

newsletters (see Appendix A), asking interested members to contact me directly for more information. Churches contacted included Anglican, Open Brethren, Presbyterian and Baptist denominations, but all with the common characteristic of self-identifying as being evangelical.

#### **3.3.4.1.2 Ethics**

This research required application for Ethics approval to the University of Otago's Department of Theology and Religion. The application (Appendix B) identified two key areas of ethical concern. Firstly, that the well-being of participants needed to be protected and that each participant needed to be aware of their rights to confidentiality, safety and the ownership of their data. Secondly, however, participants needed to be aware that in the unlikely situation of disclosure of an illegal act or activity, their confidentiality would not be protected, as I would have a duty to inform authorities of any such illegal behavior. Fortunately, this event did not transpire. Following an approach from an interested person, usually by email or telephone, I contacted the person and sent a copy of the Participant Information Sheet (Appendix C). This information sheet gives further information about the project, explains the interview process, time requirements, and explains the participants' rights in terms of withdrawing from the research at any time. I also sent each potential participant a copy of the Participant Consent Form (Appendix D). At the start of each interview, I raised each of these issues with participants, and explained that at any stage of the interview, or subsequently to the point of printing of the thesis, they would have the right to withdraw their information. In the interest of confidentiality, participants' names and other identifying material were taken out of the interview transcripts or changed to an alias. Following transcription of each interview, I emailed a copy of the transcript to the participant and asked them to identify any content that they would like changed or removed in order to further safeguard their privacy. A small number of participants made some changes, while most were happy with the transcript as it was presented. In the transcripts and in all quotes used throughout this thesis, participants are referred to only by their number in the interview order.

#### **3.3.4.1.3 The Interview Process**

Interviews were conducted at a location of each participant's choice. For some this meant an invite to their home, whereas others preferred to come to my home. On each

occasion, a quiet room was selected to allow for clear recording of the interview. At the interview, if it had not been completed prior, each participant signed the Participant Consent Form. Interview duration was between 60-90 minutes and participants were also asked if they would be prepared to participate in a follow-up interview if required. I made the decision to transcribe the interviews myself as I wanted to begin the process of deeply engaging with the material. This was time-consuming, but a valuable part of the process of becoming familiar with the data as it emerged from the transcripts. Following Charmaz's introduction to constructivist interview practices, I approached each interview with an open-ended structure, a few questions intended to stimulate a narrative response from the participants and a willingness to listen to whatever material the participants presented. To start each interview, I would ask a question something like, "The Bible tells us that Jesus died for us – can you tell me a little about what that means for you?" Most participants would then speak at length around this topic, though some more briefly, and I would ask for clarification or further explanation of ideas that they raised. Later in the interview, my second central question would be something like, "Can you tell me about how the cross impacts on your everyday life?" In some interviews, because of the narrative that the participants had unfolded, they had already given information about this type of question and so, rather than asking this I would follow-up on the material that they had already raised. At all times my intent was to allow each participant to tell their own story as fully as possible, rather than imposing my own agenda on the interview. At times some participants seemed to "head off on a tangent" that appeared unrelated to the question I was interested in. Mindful of Glaser's dictum, "All is data," I followed these avenues by asking prompting, open-ended questions because it seemed to me that the participants were telling their stories and that there would be relevant and helpful data to emerge from these discursions.

#### ***3.3.4.1.4 The Participants***

The initial sample of fifteen participants covered a reasonably wide demographic spread, represented by the figures on the following page:

Table 2: Participant demographics 1

Gender	Male: 5 Female: 10
Ages	20-29: 1 30-39: 5 40-49: 2 50-59: 3 60-69: 4
Ethnicity	NZ European/Pakeha: 12 Fijian Kiwi: 1 American Kiwi: 1 Anglo-Indigenous Fijian: 1
Denominational Affiliation	Anglican: 7 Open Brethren: 2 Baptist: 1 Independent: 3 No affiliation: 2 <sup>134</sup>

Length of Christian experience: 13 participants identified having been Christians since early childhood due to their Christian family background. Of those 13, 9 identified a specific age when they made a personal decision to follow Christ: at ages 3, 4, 5, 5, 8, 10, 10, 18, 22. Two participants did not initially grow up in Christian homes – one became a Christian at age 11 when his parents were converted and one became a Christian at age 20. Of the 15 participants, 7 expressed that despite their early commitments or family history they had chosen to have ‘time away’ from the church for a number of reasons, coming back to their faith after varying lengths of time. All participants attended churches that identified as having an evangelical persuasion. One participant concluded his interview by announcing that he was ‘liberal’ and not ‘evangelical’ but had wanted to take part anyway.

---

<sup>134</sup> This question provoked interesting responses, with a number of participants resisting the ‘label’ of a church affiliation, preferring to call themselves ‘Christian’ or in the case of one participant ‘All, and none’. Even for those who did identify a denomination, only 3 had been in that denomination exclusively, while the remaining 10 had moved denominations at least once, if not more. Denominational boundaries seem far less concrete than they used to be and participants expressed choosing their current church for many different reasons that did not include denomination.

In addition to this initial group of participants, the second group of four participants presented the following demographics:

Table 3: Participant demographics 2

Gender	Male: 3 Female: 1
Age	20-29: 2 30-39: 2
Ethnicity	NZ European: 3 Kiwi Indian: 1
Denominational affiliation	Baptist/Non-denominational: 1 Pentecostal: 1 Pentecostal/Baptist: 1 Non-denominational: 1 <sup>135</sup>

### 3.3.4.2 Initial Coding

Although Charmaz follows a slightly different pattern of coding to other key grounded theorists, essentially the central principles for coding and category development are similar.<sup>136</sup> Charmaz encourages recording and full transcription of interviews so as to allow line-by-line coding, or even word-by-word, which allow coding without the loss of information that may arise from only taking notes during interviews. Also, following constructivist epistemology, Charmaz is clear that in the coding process it is the researcher who is constructing codes that represent how they see the data. This is important of course, because in the language used in coding, the researcher represents their own views and values in addition to the data, and so coding necessarily involves the constructivist researcher in examination of their own language as well as that of their participants.<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>135</sup> This group of participants all described themselves as not currently attending church but gave these descriptors of their previous church affiliations.

<sup>136</sup> Charmaz simply distinguishes 'initial' coding followed by 'focused' coding and finally 'theoretical' coding. See the two chapters covering these topics: Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 109-61.

<sup>137</sup> See *ibid.*, 114-15.



I began coding immediately following the transcription of the first interview, and having received feedback from the participant about a few items he wished to be changed in the transcript. Following Charmaz, initial coding followed a line-by-line approach, though as a novice grounded theory researcher I often found it difficult to code every line and so ended up coding critical blocks of text. I deliberately used gerunds for almost every code, as gerunds give a sense of “action and sequence” that is lost with the use of nouns.<sup>138</sup> On occasions a participant’s expression stood out in a particular way and I used these occasions to designate ‘in vivo’ codes. Included below is a section of initial coding from an early interview, with Participant 5, who was describing her early confession of faith as a five year old.

Table 4: Initial coding example

<p>5: I remember the process... my Dad’s rather blunt about the connection between sin and hell (Right!) and raised it when I was very young, when I knew enough (OK...) Yeah, yeah....and I had plenty to think about, yeah...I remember praying very young....</p> <p>5: Um... Well I still remember it, so significant... um, my memory is actually of actually praying in bed, like for forgiveness... and having a real recognition that I needed it... not the recognition that grew over the years but just a very simplistic (Yeah) need to get right with God, and I, my memory is of not having certainty that my prayer had been answered, and then I have another memory of feeling at peace, I didn’t need to keep praying that (Wow...)... of course, he’s answered my prayer that you know (Yeah...) I trust in Jesus, I’m going to heaven, kind of (Yeah...) just that assurance at some point...</p>	<p>Remembering father’s presentation of hell.</p> <p>Remembering praying.</p> <p>Praying for forgiveness as a 4 year old.</p> <p>Recognising need for forgiveness.</p> <p>Being ‘right’ with God.</p> <p>Knowing her prayer was answered.</p> <p>Feeling at peace.</p> <p>Trusting Jesus for going to heaven.</p>
---	---

Later in the interview, the participant was reflecting on her memorizing of scripture passages from a very young age, which included learning the text of Isaiah 53 as a seven year old. Her words were, “Little kids, you could stuff chapters into them no problem, seriously...the older I get the harder it is,” which I coded with the in-vivo code, “Stuffing it in”.

<sup>138</sup> Charmaz discusses Glaser’s use of gerunds indicating the practice across the spectrum of grounded theorists. Ibid., 120-21.

During the early stages, as I completed the initial coding of the first set of interviews, I began working on focused coding of the data, as described by Charmaz: “concentrating on what your initial codes say and the comparisons you make with and between them.”<sup>139</sup> This involved thinking of codes that could encompass groups of initial codes and lift them to a higher level of abstraction. For each of these focused codes I allocated a title that represented the ideas being expressed. These were then tabled in a way that allowed some comparison between the focused codes for the first ten interviews. Where there seemed to be some commonality between groups of codes, this was represented on the table through horizontal groupings (Appendix E).

### 3.3.4.3 Constant Comparative Analysis

Whilst the intention to adhere to the process of constant comparative analysis was central to my research planning, and to a large extent I was able to make this happen, a number of factors did contribute to make this challenging. Firstly, because of the need to get advertising for participants into churches, I ended up on several occasions with more participants needing to be interviewed than I really had time for if I was to both transcribe all the material and then spend adequate time in the transcripts coding, comparing and analyzing. I felt that once participants expressed an interest in participating I needed to follow up quickly on their interest, and on several occasions this meant I had a ‘back-log’ of transcription work to cope with. The second problem was a pressure related to my wider life/work situation, which meant that during the data gathering and analysis phase of the research I had two extended breaks of five and six months away from the research. This presented the challenges of both keeping up with the flow of interviews as they were able to occur, but also keeping my analytic thinking up-to-date with the data over several extended forced breaks. The first five interviews were completed between September 2014 and early December 2014. The next three interviews were completed in March 2015, the next seven interviews between November 2015 and February 2016 and the final three interviews in November-December 2016. Despite these interruptions to the flow of the research, completing the transcriptions myself was a great help as it meant that I was already intimately involved in the data, and each time I returned to analysis I was able to quickly re-immense in the data, whilst at the same time sometimes ‘seeing’ with fresh insight. I found that re-

---

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 140.

reading through whole interviews helped to keep each participant's story fresh in my mind and regularly scanning through lists of codes and focused codes was a good way of also keeping those codes at the forefront of my thinking. In this way I became very familiar with all of the data, despite the interruptions to the research.

#### 3.3.4.4 Memoing

Using memos to record my thoughts, feelings and responses was at times a challenge for me as a novice grounded theory researcher. The main problem was not the actual process of writing, but rather the simple act of remembering to do so. However, as far as possible I followed the GTM process of recording my analytic ponderings, responses to data and my awareness of the impact that I had both on participants and on the data during the analytic process. As a reflexive exercise, this was important in helping me be aware of, and sensitive to, the assumptions, biases and theological perspectives that I brought both into the interview setting and into my approach to dealing with the data. An example of a memo recorded after an interview is included in full below:

Another remarkable story from a remarkable unremarkable person. Imagine being four and making a choice to follow Jesus to avoid going to hell! Imagine the father who could make an issue out of hell or heaven for a three or four year old. This participant is another of the group of deeply indoctrinated ones whose beliefs are deeply founded in their family teaching and traditions in the evangelical mode. She has a deep faith now as an adult that is sustaining her in what is obviously the loneliness of being late 30s with no partner – she got emotional on the subject but even so was extolling the way that God upholds her and supplies her every need! It was compelling to see the way her faith seems to be working for her. At times as she spoke I almost squirmed inside at the way some of her beliefs seemed to come out, but at the same time she seems content with her beliefs and the whole package fits with her life/beliefs/way of being... so who am I to critique her life of faith? (Memo 5/1)

#### 3.3.4.5 Methodological Decisions

Grounded theory methodology is an emergent research design, meaning that as the researcher analyses the emerging data, the process of coding can produce tensions that are a surprise to the researcher and can lead to changes in research direction. According to Charmaz, "By studying your data and scrutinizing your codes you learn which of these tensions raises methodological and theoretical questions and which suggest

substantive areas and leads for your to pursue.”<sup>140</sup> In the process of data analysis, this awareness of direction change occurred on two occasions. The first shift in awareness was that after a few interviews I began noticing that my primary aim of assessing the impacts of participants’ beliefs about the atonement on their wellbeing was not being addressed in the data. This was for two main reasons: first, most participants were not articulating clearly their beliefs about the atonement. Though they all had beliefs about God and were able to speak about the cross, few had a thought-through set of beliefs about the atonement. Second, I found that although the participants came from all walks of life and many spoke of very significant challenges in their lives, it seemed that their state of wellbeing in life was more dependent on a whole raft of factors other than on their beliefs, and certainly than on one specific area of belief. This raft of factors included things such as the quality of the parenting they received, the friendships they formed and maintained particularly as teenagers, their choice of spouse or partner, traumatic events in life such as childhood abuse, and so on. What the data did show, however, was that in response to questions about the cross and their lives, participants spoke clearly about their understanding of God and the way they felt he had been present in their lives and involved with the events of their lives. At the same time, many had experienced times in life when they had disconnected themselves from God for a time, before eventually coming back to their faith. As data analysis proceeded, it became more and more clear that the data was explaining participants’ journeys through life, in the faith and out of the faith. Woven into these stories were beliefs about the cross, tied into participants’ understanding of the ways that God works in the world. This realization led to a shift in focus to considering this life journey of faith, with all its ups and downs, and relating it to the ideas that participants did put forward about God. This led directly to the second shift of awareness, which was that there was a group of people who could add data to my theory but who I had not yet interviewed. During supervision, I was discussing my developing concepts with my Supervisor and I posited that as well as participants who had left their faith and come back, there were also others who had left their faith but not come back. It was pointed out to me that my data did not support this assertion, as I had not interviewed any people in this situation and therefore did not have such data. Because I was interested by this stage in the faith journeys of participants who left and came back, I made the decision to seek some additional participants who had been Christian, but were currently in a state of seeing

---

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 115.

themselves as outside the faith. This turned out to be a very easy task, as a few emails to some family members asking if they knew anyone who used to be in the church but had left, yielded at least eight potential participants. Although it proved difficult to schedule an interview with one, the next four I approached were all willing to be involved. Interestingly, after the interview each one of these participants expressed how helpful it had been to talk about their faith journey as for each one I was the first person they had been able to speak candidly to about their passage out of faith.

#### 3.3.4.6 Theoretical Construction and Integration

In this section, my intention is to describe the major stages of analysis that took place in the journey through interviewing to analysis and on to theory construction. Following the coding of the initial interviews, further interviews took place and were transcribed over the months of the analytic process, and these transcripts then added further data to the developing concepts as I compared them with each other and with previous interview data.

##### *3.3.4.6.1 Concept Development 1: Noticing Dichotomies*

Following a period of reflection on the initial coding and early focused codes, it became noticeably apparent that many participants used exclusive, 'black and white' language when talking about God, the relationship of people to God, and the situation of being human. This prompted me to go back to compare participants and to add data to the ideas developing around these dichotomies. During supervision, I was prompted to think about this concept more as 'Dichotomous thinking' to reflect the process nature of participants' thinking rather than risking getting caught representing their beliefs as fixed and inflexible. The developing concept of 'Dichotomous Thinking' included ideas about the character of God, decisions people make in response to God's character, and the outcomes that occur for people in making a choice to accept God into their lives. I worked on developing these ideas into an early diagram (Appendix F). 'Dichotomous Thinking' also raised a number of questions, some of which are related to the processes that participants had spoken about, but many related to the theological content of material raised by participants. I memoed about these matters, and became aware that I needed to remain focused on the participant's processes rather than their ideas and expressed content.

#### ***3.3.4.6.2 Concept Development 2: Conceptual Properties***

Having been alerted in supervision to the risk of becoming focused on content rather than process, I returned to the interview data, codes and focused codes to look again at raising the codes to the more abstract level of conceptual properties. The conceptual properties that I identified fell roughly into five groups: Concepts related to God, Jesus, the human state, what Christ's death has achieved and how to live (Appendix G). I felt again that central to these concepts were ideas related to dichotomous thinking, and so I began exploring the data for ideas around the concept 'God is/God isn't'. It also became clear that related material occurred around the similar concept 'God is/We are not' and so I also explored the prevalence of this material in the data. In addition, again in supervision, I had been encouraged to ask further questions of the data, including "What exceptions are there to God is/God isn't?" "What strategies do people use to maintain God is/God isn't?" "What are the consequences of God is/God isn't?" and "When, how and why do these conditions change?" Further analysis revealed data providing answers for all these questions, and in an important development suggested a further concept: "The Between Space" which was reflective of all the data that did not fit the extremes of a clear dichotomy. A diagrammatic representation of my construction of the scope of these concepts is provided in Appendix H, along with the data from interviews showing the "grounding" of the concepts. As I reflected on this diagram, I realized that it has some strengths, namely, rather than being static (as was Appendix F) it is more fluid. Also, it includes more concepts arising from codes concerning data related to the influences on participants such as home, church and family background, all of which was present in the data. After further reflection, although the diagram appears process-oriented it is not really, instead showing just some of the relationships between the various concepts, however, it was an important stage in analysis as it gave rise to the important concept of the "Between Space."

#### ***3.3.4.6.3 Concept Development 3: Concepts of God***

Further work on the God is/God isn't concept identified a range of further concepts emerging from the data. Many of these concepts related directly to the character of God, and in keeping with the black and white nature of many participants' expressions, some of these concepts appear on the surface to be mutually exclusive. For the sake of clarity, I will list all these concepts here: God is Relational, God is Restorative, God is Exclusive, God is Unattainable, God is Punitive, and God is Conditional. As can be

seen, two of these concepts seem to be opposed to the other four, a situation which gives rise to a further concept, 'Solving the Problem'. These concepts and a construction of the way that they might operate together with other factors that seem to be in operation in the lives of participants were represented in a further diagram (Appendix I). This attempt at diagramming was helpful as it included much of the data and was more fluid. Most importantly, this diagram raised a number of questions about the life of faith it represented: questions that I did not have data to provide answers for. I therefore had to return to the data to ask these questions, which are discussed next.

#### ***3.3.4.6.4 Concept Development 4: The Atonement Journey***

Following the previous analytical work and the development of the concepts presented above, a number of process-oriented questions were used to prompt further analysis of the data. These questions were, "How does Jesus being in your life change things?" "What do you do when life is difficult?" "What changes because of Christ's death for us?" "What actions bring relationship with God?" and "Did you do anything differently after making a commitment to God?" To find answers to these questions I again returned to the data to identify codes that were relevant to these concerns. The results of this phase of analysis are recorded in the diagram "The Atonement Journey" (Appendix J). This diagram lays out a framework for the multiple layers of experiences described by participants in their journeys through life and faith, including times away from formal religion and times away from personal faith. The impact of early childhood family experiences is included, as are times of decision making, factors leading people both towards and away from faith, situations where participants were faced with challenges to their beliefs or lifestyles, and the type of image of God constructed by participants in response to these multiple factors. This diagram is a depiction of participants' various life journeys, with each seeking at-onement with God; hence the title represents this atonement journey. This stage of analysis was the trigger for the major methodological decision to extend the range of participants to include some who no longer considered themselves to be Christian. This was because Diagram "J" postulates people disengaging from faith and "disappearing" but I had no data to support this. Other questions are also presented about the life of faith: questions about why participants at times had left the faith; what had triggered these events; what had then triggered the participants' return to faith. In addition, and most importantly, the ideas of a "God Construction" seemed too fixed, immobile and not open to change, and

there was evidence in the data of people's notions of God changing, which did not seem to fit within this presentation.

#### **3.3.4.6.5      *Category development: Living Between the Lines and Patterns in the Thinking Space***

As a consequence of the concerns presented above, I conducted four more interviews, transcribing and beginning analysis concurrent with ongoing analysis of previous data.

When this was done, a further brainstorming supervision session was pivotal, working at the whiteboard to explore the relationships between the identified concepts. I knew that participants had expressed a range of beliefs about God and had often linked these ideas with their lived experiences in the church. However, many participants also spoke about times when they did not live according to the expectations of their faith. Others spoke about times when they were "in between" their beliefs in some way. Diagramming these concepts again proved very helpful and led to the abstraction of the category "Living between the lines" which designates the experience of participants when they were committed to a life of faith within the church.

In addition, data analysis of the process-oriented questions revealed that participants' positions within the lines were not fixed: instead, most participants experienced times inside the lines, times outside the lines, and times of being somewhere in between. "In between" beliefs was reconceptualised as "the thinking space," a concept that explains the situation for participants when they are questioning in some way their beliefs, attitudes or expectations. Most participants had times when they "shifted" in either their beliefs or their relationship with their church, and most spoke both of the triggers for these shifts and the strategies utilized in making those changes. These other concepts relating to how participants managed in the thinking space, both in their exits and returns to life between the lines, combined together as I elevated "Patterns in the thinking space" to the level of a second category. The diagram presenting the relationship of these concepts is called "Patterns in the Thinking Space." Some of the stages of the development of the schematic "Patterns in the Thinking Space" can be found in Appendix L.

I began to refer to the theory generated from this process as "A Christian Life: Living Between the Lines," but one day as I was working on writing up the theory it occurred



to me that most participants' lives had in fact been lived both inside the lines of faith beliefs, and in the patterns of the thinking space, and so I made the important decision to call the theory "A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines." Some of the stages of the development of the final schematic "Living across the Lines" can be found in Appendix K.

The process of theoretical construction described above was not a logical, linear, structured process: rather, it resulted from hours spent within the data, helpful supervision sessions brainstorming and analyzing, and the occasional abductive insight. However, in keeping with the methodology of GTM, the concepts and categories are all grounded in the data, which I have illustrated in a table that shows some of the initial codes that led to focused codes which were subsequently conceptualized further to concept and category level. This table is presented in Appendix M. During this process, perhaps more than at any other stage, I was acutely aware of my influence as researcher on the co-construction of the concepts, categories and theory.<sup>141</sup> Charmaz writes, "Published writers often act as if they proceeded on a single path with a clear destination from choosing their topics to writing their conclusions. More likely, the path is neither single, nor the destination clear. And today you can write about the bumps in the road as well."<sup>142</sup> This insight is certainly true for the development of this theory, which will be explained over the course of the next three chapters.

#### 3.3.4.7 Criteria for Rigor

As discussed previously, criteria for establishing the rigor or authenticity of a grounded theory study vary considerably among the key theorists. Charmaz suggests that constructivist grounded theorists use the criteria of 'Credibility', 'Originality', 'Resonance' and 'Usefulness'.<sup>143</sup> As a novice GTM researcher however, Birks' and Mills' call for 'Comprehensive evaluation,' and the questions they suggest provide welcome clarity around the criteria that could be used to assess the quality of a grounded theory. Accordingly, I have considered each of the criteria listed by Birks and Mills in an effort to both self-evaluate and provide an account indicating the validity of the theory.<sup>144</sup> This

---

<sup>141</sup> See Hall and Callery, "Enhancing the Rigor of Grounded Theory," 261-62.

<sup>142</sup> Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory*, 290.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 337-38.

<sup>144</sup> See Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 153-54.

self-evaluative approach to establishing the rigor of this study is provided in Appendix N.

### **3.4 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter we have explored the philosophical underpinnings of GTM, and considered a range of the different methods used in carrying out grounded theory studies. In particular, we have suggested that some early prescriptions of GTM strayed from their philosophical roots, and have discussed constructivist approaches to GTM as a way of re-visioning GTM as being true to its pragmatist and symbolic interactionist foundations. We have discussed both the general GTM strategies and constructivist strategies used at a theoretical level, and gone on to discuss the practicalities of implementing these in this study. I outlined the ethical issues that need to be considered, and discussed the potential impact of the researcher's experience, attitudes and beliefs on the study. Finally, as I outlined the methods used for selection of participants, data collection, interviewing, data analysis and development of theory, I did so using examples from this research to illustrate each of these elements of the constructivist approach to GTM.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Research Findings Overview**

### **A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines**

#### **4.1 INTRODUCTION**

The initial aim of this research was to explore whether beliefs about the atonement have an impact on the lives of evangelical Christians. What became clear at an early stage in the interview process was that many participants had limited conceptual understanding of the atonement and that their views were most likely to have been informed through experiences in their childhood homes, particularly through the approach of parents. Later teaching received about the cross in the churches that participants attended, both directly and indirectly, was added to the frameworks in place from an early age. Importantly, participants' experiences in life seemed to bear little relationship to what they did articulate about the atonement, and it seemed clear that many factors played more significant roles than this one area of belief in impacting on participants' lives.

Most participants were able to speak about their interpretation of the atonement to some degree, but as the research proceeded what became clear from data collection and analysis was reflective of a wider area of interest, dealing with the experience participants had of their faith, their relationship with God and participation in local church congregations in light of the beliefs they held about God. An important category that was developed from analysis was that of "Living between the lines," which explained the lives of participants who lived within boundaries of their beliefs. The majority of participants described the influence of their families on the early development of beliefs. These beliefs were then developed and reinforced through experiences in a local church, and through these combined influences, participants developed initial ideas about God. Most participants later developed fuller theologies reflecting on different aspects of God, his work in the world, and their relationship with him. These beliefs came to define the boundaries of living between the lines, where adhering to the beliefs and fitting within the expectations of the beliefs were marks of being a Christian. Living a Christian life was therefore presented as living between the lines. What was particularly interesting was that just over half of the main group of participants had actually spent

time in their lives when, according to their accounts they, “went through quite a troubled time trying to sort it all out” (3/3/1). Participants spoke of their times outside the lines in a variety of ways: “then realized... I don’t really know what I stand for...so started exploring that more and more...trying to prove that God wasn’t real almost...” (6/1-2); “but then I hit the teenage years and went straight off in another direction” (13/1/2); “and I’ve had a bit of a journey away from that, one time I got disillusioned with the church and people...” (14/1/4). One way of accounting for these times away from church, and perhaps away from faith, would be to say that at these times of being outside the lines the participants were not Christians. However, many of the participants described experiences during these times outside the lines when they were aware of God and even spoke to him. This realisation led to the construction of the theory: “A Christian life: living across the lines.”

Living across the lines suggests that while evangelical Christians might define a Christian life as being between the lines, boundaried by specific beliefs and actions, the experience of many participants is that throughout their lives they wove in and out of the lines, sometimes more aware of God than at others, sometimes acting more in accordance with church expectations and sometimes less so, and sometimes believing certain tenets of faith and at times questioning or challenging those beliefs.

In this overview chapter, I will first introduce findings from participants concerning their beliefs and perceptions of the atonement. Then, I will outline and explain the theory “Living Across the Lines.” In chapters 4 and 5, the presentation of findings will widen out to encompass participants’ broader views of God and faith, with detail being added to explain the processes involved. These three chapters will be restricted to presenting the findings from participants and explaining the structure of the theory. In the final chapter, we will turn to discuss these findings from a theological perspective.

In this, and subsequent Findings chapters, quotes from participants are included to illustrate and provide support for the claims of the developing theory. Participant comments have been quoted verbatim as far as possible, though for sake of clarity I have removed extraneous material such as “Ums” and “Mms,” and removed repetitions. Where words have been omitted to simplify the flow of the quote this has been indicated by ..., and where a word or words that were implied but not spoken have been added to

aid comprehension, these have been included in square brackets [ ]. Each quote is referenced with a threefold number, e.g., 12/4/5, where the first number designates the participant, the second number identifies the page in the transcript and the third number is the paragraph on that page. Occasionally, a number may represent a quote running over two pages, e.g., 13/3-4 designates participant 13, quote running from p. 3-4. On a few occasions, quotes from participants use names of friends or relatives, and where this occurs, the real names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

## **4.2 PARTICIPANT PERCEPTIONS OF THE ATONEMENT**

In talking about the atonement, a number of participants used common metaphors and images from the Bible to explain their understanding of the cross, with varying degrees of explanation and analysis. Some participants also made some reference to one of the commonly accepted models of the atonement by using language that represented the understanding of one of the models, although only two participants referred to one of the models by name. In contrast, a significant number of participants explained that they found it hard to understand the atonement and that consequently their preferred approach was to “not question” but rather “simply believe.” In these situations it was usually less clear what it was that these participants believed in. The dominant narrative presented by participants to explain the atonement used a range of ideas and images taken from a variety of sources including the Bible, classic hymns and contemporary songs, together with other phrases seemingly repeated as “Christian truth” from participants’ upbringing and Christian experience. This dominant narrative was presented as a problem-solving model, where a problem was presented, Jesus was seen to take action to solve the problem thereby producing favourable consequences for believers. In the following sections I will present findings from these three main approaches in more detail.

### **4.2.1 BIBLICAL METAPHORS AND ATONEMENT MODELS**

Participants referred to, or used a range of Biblical metaphors in their explanations of the atonement, including reconciliation, ransom, redemption, offering, sacrifice and adoption.

Well, OK that's been told to us and... my believing in that or the piece of 'He died for our sins' so therefore I do feel that we do have redemption... (12/8/5).

I'm his, I'm his child and it doesn't matter what I do or don't do, I'm his, I belong to his family, I carry his name, I'm his... (7/1/2).

I guess primarily I would see Jesus' death as taking a broken relationship with God and Jesus' death enabling it to be restored... (2/1/6)

... so that I could have a relationship with God... (17/4/4).

Sacrifice was the most common idea presented, with participants making references to the Old Testament system of sacrifices to back up their ideas.

...the fact that by one sacrifice he has perfected for all time... and that perfected for all time is a concept of qualifying someone to approach God... (10/2/2).

...so I guess he got to the point where he realized 'Well I can fix this with one ... big sacrifice and that will be my son dying... on behalf of the human race' (19/11/4).

Participants tended to use a single metaphor as a dominant idea they presented, though a few did present multiple metaphors, for example:

...the fact that we are reconciled to God, that we're been made you know children of God, you know co-heirs, that we have reconciliation you know... (3/5/3).

...his life was laid down as a ransom for many... he willingly gave himself up to be an offering on behalf of all those who followed in his way... (1/1/6).

One participant used her own metaphor, referring to the atonement as a "qualification" that gains a fresh start for believers:

... the cross was a means of passing through to obtain... like you go to University, a means to obtain the qualification to practice whatever and it was going through that cross and that experience that... brought me to a new land and a new space and a new mindset, new outlook, new perceptions, new... new everything...(9/5/3).

A few participants also spoke about the cross in ways that reflected some of the major models of the atonement. Although they did not refer to the models by name, the ideas presented seemed to concur with some of the significant theories:

Christus Victor:

I mean, on the cross because he died and descended into hell and won the thing over life and death... therefore, you know there was victory and therefore there is the chance for life... (14/4/3).

Moral Influence:

I think the cross was a particularly dramatic expression of the atonement... but I think that his life was even more persuasive... of his constant effort to be at one with the will of God, and the good of God's people... (1/2/7).

One participant explained that because he had no idea about what he believed about the atonement he had done some research prior to interview. His approach was to "Google" the subject and he explained that the first ten results of his google search presented Penal Substitution as the only explanation of the atonement. Because this participant felt uncomfortable with what he read, he continued his search until he came across Derek Flood's book *Healing the Gospel*<sup>1</sup> which presented a Restorative model that the participant said he felt comfortable with.

#### 4.2.2 UNCERTAINTY

Similar to the participant mentioned above, other participants spoke of being confused by the atonement, not understanding what it entails and so making a decision to not make any further attempt to understand. These participants framed their responses by speaking of "just believing," "having faith" and not needing to understand God's reasoning for the death of Jesus:

I guess the whole thing of somebody dying on a cross and going through all that stuff is something I can't rationalize... except that if that's God's way that's his way you know... to me God's got to be pretty big you know, for me to operate he's gotta be huge you know, and I don't... I wonder about his ways often, but I don't question his ways so much... (14/3/3).

... for me I do believe in Jesus therefore I do believe that he died on the cross... that's all I have to do, I don't have to kind of investigate it and really deeply understand it... (6/6/5).

...see some of those things I don't actually analyse and I don't sort of understand, well I haven't sought answers but I sort of... just believed God and Jesus... (12/7/5).

---

<sup>1</sup> Derek Flood, *Healing the Gospel: A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross* (Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2012).

... well my first question was to myself, well what does it? You ask me the question and I think, "Well what does it mean?" (11/1/4)

Another participant, who had grown up in a Pentecostal church and been thoroughly involved in what he described as the "exciting experiences" there as a young person, made a decision to go to a Bible School as an eighteen year old because:

I recognized that in myself I'd been around these kind of hyper-spiritual church environments my whole life and had no idea about anything to do with the Bible, and certainly didn't know who the person of Jesus was, nor did I care at that stage... (18/3/1).

### 4.2.3 THE DOMINANT NARRATIVE

Having explained that some participants did use Biblical images or reflect on different models of the atonement, I will turn now to discuss the dominant narrative presented by participants in response to questions about the atonement. This narrative is composed of three parts: a problem presented; the action taken by Jesus; and the consequences understood to result from that action.

#### 4.2.3.1 A Problem Presented

Participants spoke of a problem existing between humanity and God because of God's holiness and humanity's sinfulness. The gulf between these two extremes means that God cannot be in relationship with people, even though he wants to:

...God...couldn't...he was incapable of having a relationship with me, or humankind because of sin... (17/4/4).

Not only was God seen as being incapable of having a relationship with sinful humanity, humanity was subsequently unable to do anything to approach God because of this state of sin. The next, very important meaning that followed from this for participants, was that the polar opposites of God's holiness and humanity's sinfulness created a situation where God demands punishment for sin:

I guess I see it as, the fact that God's holiness, God's standard required punishment for the sin of the world ... (2/4/11).



God's holiness demands that there's justice, there's punishment for that, which means that we experience separation from him... (4/2/1).

... in the spiritual sense we can't be in God's presence broken as we are because we deserve judgment... (5/3/6).

#### 4.2.3.2 The Action Taken by Jesus

In the dominant model presented by participants, people deserve the judgment and punishment of God, but Jesus stepped into this terrible situation by taking the punishment on himself. This is expressed in various ways, and here I include a large representation of quotes from participants to show how prevalent this understanding of the atonement is:

... it was God's plan to send Jesus from early on to pay that price and that's what happened, Jesus came, lived and died and that was part of God's absolute plan, to pay a price... (2/4/11).

Jesus' death on the cross means that I am made acceptable to God, that he's taken on my sin, and my punishment, that I was deserving of, he's taken that on himself and he's removed that... (4/1/3).

So as a just judge I understand God needing... the price to be paid...there has to be a cost because we're innately in rebellion against him...so the cross is his way of paying the price himself... (5/3/6).

I'm not quite sure on that theologically but he chose to take away our shame, he chose to pay the price to put that relationship right... (8/2/1).

...Christ died, for my sins, so I ask forgiveness so, so they're all gone you know... he died for those sins. They're gone, they're forgiven... (13/4/4).

... he sent his only son, one bit of the Trinity to die on behalf of me, so that I could have a relationship with God... (17/4/4).

... and he will take the punishment for them and if they just accept him as their Lord and saviour they will have access into my kingdom. Yeah, I mean get forgiven... (19/11/4)

#### 4.2.3.3 The Consequences

The consequence of Jesus dying on behalf of humanity was expressed most clearly by participants as a renewed ability to have relationship with God. Without the death of Jesus, such relationship was not possible, but because the death of Jesus allowed God

to forgive sinful humanity, the door was opened for humanity to approach God in relationship, to be forgiven and accepted by God. Further consequences flow from this forgiveness, importantly, that participants spoke about no longer needing to feel guilty, condemned or shameful. Instead, they spoke of finding freedom and new life. The final positive consequence was that a number of participants also spoke about the consequence of gaining eternal life. Many of these ideas were encapsulated in the comment of one participant, who said:

...so his dying, I mean to me it's... the only pathway that I can find to have that communication with God and know there is life after death and all that... things I believe in... without it we're under the law and under condemnation and, and there's no way of beating that and with it, its Jesus' sacrifices... you know I'm living under his love now, under his grace, its poured out for me and I can sit in there with, I mean he's the one that's perfect and he can be in front of me before God and I can live life you know... without being feeling condemned... (14/3/3).

#### **4.3 LIVING ACROSS THE LINES: OVERVIEW**

As has been mentioned above, participants described how their belief that Christ had died for them had assisted them through their experiences in life. However, it did not appear that the specific beliefs about Jesus' death seemed to impact on participants' descriptions: the important factor was that they believed that Christ died for them, because that belief meant that God loved them and wanted the best for them. Importantly, while participants' understanding of Jesus' death on the cross certainly played some role in their descriptions of life events, their narratives always turned to a wider description of God, faith and the impact of these on their experiences of life. The process of data analysis therefore revealed a larger picture than was first expected, leading to the construction of the grounded theory "A Christian life: Living across the lines."

In this section I will present this theory in outline. On the following page, Figure 1 depicts the theory, showing the major categories. The figure is intended as a fluid representation of the life journeys of participants, travelling through time from left to right.

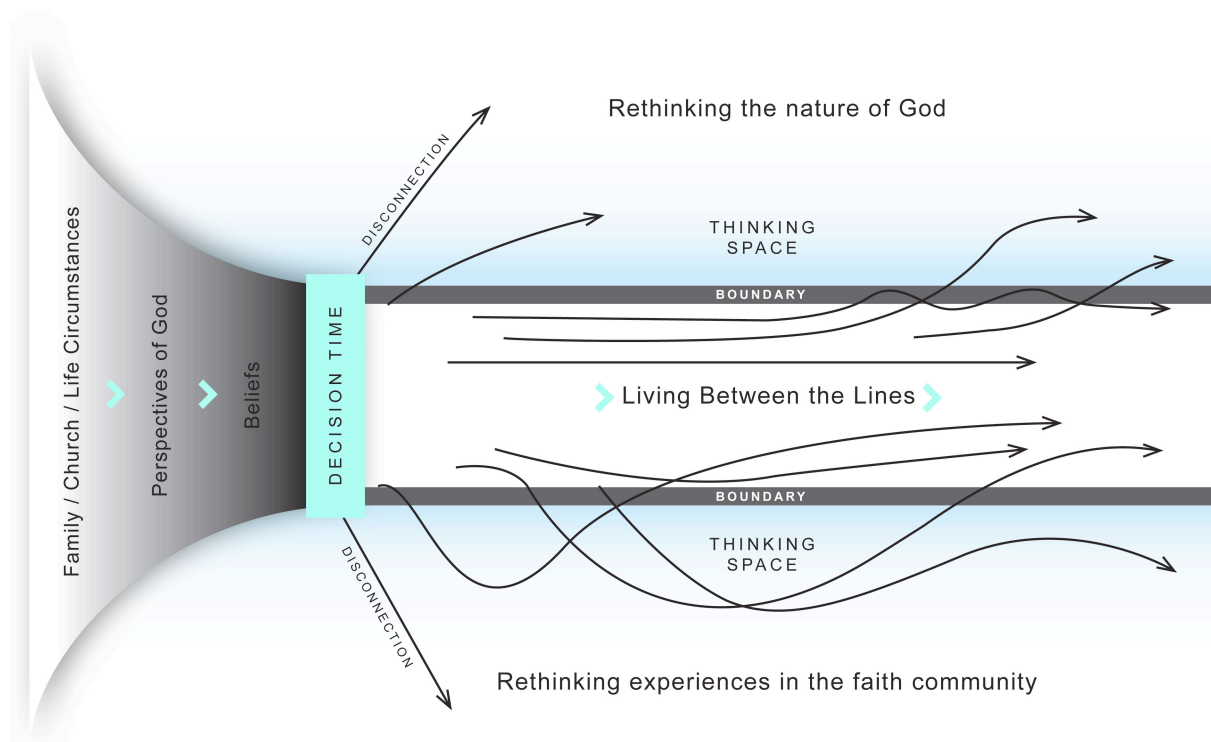


Figure 1: A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines

At the left of the figure is a funnel-like shape depicting the early conditions that contribute to participants entering a life between the lines. These factors include the families that participants grew up in, the churches they attended with their families and contributing circumstances of life that impacted on their formative years. From these early experiences, participants begin life with a series of perceptions of God. Over time, these perceptions are added to, grow and are modified, particularly through the influence of the local church, though a number of participants also spoke about strong influence from parachurch organisations, for example “Youth with a Mission” and “Campus Crusade for Christ.” A number of participants also spoke of the ongoing influence of parents or other Christian role-models and mentors. The result of all these influences is that participants developed their own theologies: their own ways of thinking about God in their lives in a more complex way than the simple perceptions of God. At the end of the funnel, marking entrance to a life between the lines is a point of making a decision. This time of decision-making, seen by participants as an extremely important time in their lives, was the occasion when they made the decision to become a Christian, variously described as “accepting Jesus as my Lord and saviour”; “asking Jesus into my heart”; or “giving my life to Christ.” For participants, this decision-time

was typically in their childhood, at ages as young as four. However, some participants did not specify a time of making a decision, referring to themselves instead as having “always been Christian” by virtue of having grown up in a Christian family. These participants described always knowing that they were Christian in such a way that there was never a point where they needed to “become” a Christian through a specific time of decision-making. In contrast, some participants described multiple occasions of decision-making, where each occasion was a reinforcement or check that the previous decision had been complete and adequate.

Having made a decision to be a Christian, or having grown in awareness of this Christian identity, participants described a life of faith that was prescribed to a large degree by their beliefs about God and by the teaching and expectations of their community of faith. During analysis, I identified the major category “Living between the lines” as explanatory of participants’ description of living a life of faith that adhered to their beliefs about God and the expectations of the evangelical churches they attended. Living between the lines explains the boundaries that are put in place by evangelical beliefs, both in terms of beliefs about God and beliefs about the expectations of life experiences for believers. These boundaries are highly significant for believers because they demarcate between what is acceptable and what is not acceptable in life between the lines. Additionally, the boundaries mark a distinction between those who are “in” the faith and those “outside” the faith, where those “in” are able to be in relationship with God and have received salvation, both of which are not available to those “outside.” Living between the lines is characterized both by adherence to particular beliefs and practices, and also by eschewing beliefs and practices that are not deemed acceptable between the lines.

Living between the lines has a powerful emotional draw for three main reasons. Firstly, the passage for many participants into life between the lines involved a personal decision being made to follow in Christ’s way and this was often an emotional event, marking the start of each participant’s Christian journey. For those participants who did not identify a specific moment of decision-making, their Christian identity was deeply tied to their family of origin with all the history, ritual and family stories that are central to the formation of identity. For these participants, their acceptance of entry to faith was also laden with emotional content. Second, living between the lines identified participants

with a community of faith, where spending time with others around shared values and beliefs supported the participant and strengthened them in the beliefs and values that the faith community espoused. Most participants had experience of a number of different churches, including different denominations: the most important factor in finding a faith community was not the denomination so much as the beliefs in the community, and all participants except one identified strongly with the need for a church with clear evangelical beliefs. Third, life between the lines was maintained by a personal relationship with Christ. Participants explained that by his death on the cross, Christ personally “saved” each person and brought them into a relationship with God that would otherwise have been impossible. Thus, each believer in Christ has been “freely given” the great gift of salvation, which entails relationship with God in this life and eternal life after death. Because there was a great cost to God in providing Christ for this purpose of gaining relationship with people, participants expressed their thanks and indebtedness to God for saving them and sparing them from a life outside the lines, which was seen as being devoid of relationship with God.

Life between the lines was seen by participants as safe and desirable, where believers were in relationship with God and therefore able to receive blessings from God. Life between the lines was definitely the approved and accepted pathway for Christians to take. Though a small number of participants spoke about their faith in a way that described consistent presence between the lines, many others described times in their lives when they were not between the lines. The surprising finding that a significant majority of participants either had experienced, or were currently experiencing time outside the lines is represented by the undulating lines that weave back and forward across the straight lines that are the boundaries marking life between the lines.

These periods of not being between the lines varied in several ways: in the length of time the participant stayed outside the lines, in the degree to which they moved outside the lines, and in the manner in which they experienced life outside the lines. For some, being outside the lines was marked by a disconnection involving their beliefs about God, whereas for others the disconnection was between their experiences in life and the experiences that were expected as normative for a life between the lines. For some participants of course, these two dimensions were fused together in a disconnection that was both theological and experiential.

Space outside the lines is designated the “Thinking space” because here participants explored both what they believed inside the lines and what being outside the lines might be like. Participants’ movements from between the lines to this thinking space outside the lines were always in response to conditions that occurred in their lives. When such conditions arose, participants responded with a range of actions that relocated them, either in terms of their beliefs about God or in terms of their experiences in life. The theory “Living across the lines,” explains that there is always a thinking space that lies just outside the lines and is the space and time where participants processed the conditions they experienced and made decisions about the actions they would take in response. Some participants spent only a short time in the thinking space whereas others spent considerably longer, and for some, passage through the thinking space led to a time when they did not consider themselves Christian, having moved too far away from life between the lines. Perhaps surprisingly, many participants who reported such a time away from life between the lines concurrently reported having conversations with God about their journey. Participants who moved through the thinking space into a time outside the lines often experienced further conditions that returned them to further time in the thinking space, and for some this precipitated a return to life between the lines. Other participants, however, continued to remain away from life between the lines, either in some re-evaluated form of their faith, or in a state that at the time of interview was described as being away from their faith altogether.

#### **4.4 CONCLUSION**

In this overview of findings chapter, I have briefly outlined what participants presented as their beliefs about the death of Christ on the cross. This involved insight into a number of biblical images and metaphors, and also ideas representing some of the theories of the atonement. In particular, the predominant beliefs revolved around an action-consequences model in which Jesus died to set people free so that they can have a relationship with God. I then introduced the theory “Living across the lines,” which explains the wider narrative presented by participants, which concerned their understanding of the nature of God, the decision to become a Christian and the choice of a life between the lines. The theory then goes on to explain the experience of many participants in the thinking space, experiencing life outside the lines. In Chapter 5: Findings 2, I am going to explain in more detail the perspectives participants have of

God, their subsequent theologies, and how the boundaries are maintained as people live between the lines. In Chapter 6: Findings 3, I will explain in detail the journeys participants took outside the lines, including the conditions for moving outside the lines, the conditions for moving back inside, and the strategies that participants used at these times in their lives.





## **Chapter 5**

### **Research Findings 2**

### **Living Between the Lines**

#### **5.1 INTRODUCTION**

In this chapter I am going to explain how contributions from participants led to the construction of the category “Living between the lines.” I will start by presenting participants’ perspectives of God, and then go on to discuss participants’ theologies. This will lead to a discussion of “Decision time” and finally to an explanation of life between the lines. These dimension of the theory are represented in Figure 1 as the funnel on the left, leading to the grey parallel lines through the centre of the figure. While participants were able to elucidate their views of the atonement to varying degrees, what was notable was that every participant spoke with greater awareness and clarity about their wider understanding of God and the various beliefs they held about God, especially in relationship to their own experiences in life. Every participant spoke at length about their life, particularly in terms of their experience of God, how that had worked out in their church, relationships with others and how they saw God’s presence at work in their life.

The major category “Living Between the Lines,” therefore explains an evangelical Christian construction of life, framed within the theologies that are characteristic of evangelical faith and are formed from participants’ perspectives of God, that in turn are the product of family and church teaching and experience. Living between the lines explains how boundaries exist for Christians that encourage them to stay between the lines, what happens when they move beyond these boundaries, and the varying explanations held about life outside the lines.

#### **5.2 PERSPECTIVES OF GOD**

All participants expressed a range of ideas, opinions and feelings about God. Some participants were clearer in their ideas, appearing to hold their beliefs as firmly fixed and not open to potential change. Other participants, however, expressed less

conviction around their beliefs about God, with some questioning the ideas they presented and some expressing that they had given up trying to understand God and had chosen to simply have faith and believe. The perspectives that participants hold about God have been formed through a complex set of experiences throughout their lifespan, commencing in the earliest years in the family of origin. These earliest of events in the formation of these perspectives pre-date the conscious memory of participants, as was indicated by the participant who, responding to a question about how long she had been a Christian, said, "...forever, because I would say the identification of Christianity was in place before I even arrived here..." (15/1/6). Obviously, participants were not able to articulate such early influences, and yet a number of participants spoke about some deeply held belief about God with expressions such as, "I'm not sure why, but I've always felt that..." It is possible that such deep convictions may at least in part be attributed to the earliest pre-verbal family experiences of participants. By the age of 3 or 4, a number of participants reported memories of family events that had been significant in their later faith development. One participant recalled her early experience of attending church with her parents where there was a focus on Communion: "...focusing on the blood of Christ and all of those things, and each week we'd be kind of taken to those things, as... you know, the crucial?" (2/2/3). Some participants reported, "making decisions to follow Jesus" or "accept Christ" into their hearts at very young ages, a reflection of the teaching and expectations in their families of origin. For most other participants, these points of decision-making did not occur until a little later in life, but still before the teenage years. For these participants, ideas about God had already been formed within the first 10 years of life. Along with the impact of family life, church attendance was also a contributing factor in perspectives of God. Many participants spoke of attending church camps, hearing speakers at church who had an impact and having affective memories of church music. These events contribute to their perspectives, especially as they occur during such formative years.

Other life events were reported to play a significant role in the development of ideas about God. Participants mentioned the presence of particularly strong friendships with other Christian children, the influence of other adults from within the church, and for one participant the impact of childhood sexual abuse. Such significant events or relationships add layers of complexity to the ways that people construct their ideas of

God. I will now explain some of the main concepts that appeared in participants' perspectives of God.

### 5.2.1 GOD IS RELATIONAL

A major concept about God reported by participants was that God seeks to have relationship with people. Participants talked of God speaking to them, guiding or directing their decision-making, encouraging them at difficult times in their lives or directing them to change something that was wrong in their lives. God was perceived as sometimes speaking through the words of the Bible and sometimes directly to the person in words that appeared in their minds but which they believed to be from God. Some participants experienced God as a presence in their lives that they acknowledged to be God. Participants attributed various names to this God of relationship. For some participants, their experience was of the "Spirit" of God, where the Spirit was described as being present with them, bringing peace, comfort or calm. Other participants spoke of God the Father and others of Jesus as the one who would "front up" and speak to them. The dimension of this relationship common to most participants is that God is loving, is concerned for the person, and wants to be involved in their lives:

...you know I'd read books and talk to [my pastor] and pester people with all sorts of questions and it got to a point where God just dealt with me personally and suddenly the details didn't matter... (7/4/9).

Participants explained that God's relational nature is expressed in the death of Jesus: it is this death that makes relationship possible between God and humans:

The fact that he died, um, well I think its huge because if he hadn't died then I wouldn't have the Spirit walking with me that I can talk to and ...it would be different, because that's what we have now because of those...circumstances that happened to Jesus... (12/10/7).

At times, God was seen as requiring a person to "give up" something or change an attitude, but such requirements were seen by participants as a positive outworking of their relationship with God, whereby he was involved in their lives and participated to achieve good outcomes for them. Participants also expressed the need to contribute to their relationship with God through some degree of effort on their behalf in approaching God, aiming to spend time in his presence and seeking to hear his voice speak to them.

...so I kind of think how do we bring that relationship with God closer...you know, more, more on that real, the real stuff you know, the real kind of way we see God... (2/15/5).

He's there, He's always doing something and I'm not always seeking hard after Him...so if I don't feel Him close I know why, its because I haven't been relying on Him (5/14/7).

## 5.2.2 GOD IS RESTORATIVE

Participants also spoke of God as having a character or nature that wants to restore any relationship with people that has been damaged. This concept flows on from the concept of God's love and relationality, but includes the added belief that people fail God, let him down, step out of relationship with him and in doing so become estranged from God. Because humans are not capable themselves of undoing this damage and restoring the relationship with God, participants expressed that this restoration of relationship is also God's action. According to this concept, God graciously healed the relationship with people who have damaged this relationship when they acknowledged their wrongdoing and asked God to come back into their lives. God is able to restore the broken relationship with humanity, but only because of the work of Christ on the cross.

I'm not quite sure on that theologically, but he chose to take away our shame, he chose to pay the price to put that relationship right so that we could truly be restored to him... (8/2/1).

...so the cross is his way of paying the price himself in real physical terms through Jesus' death and....paying the price that we owe, so that he can have a relationship with us again...(5/3/6).

## 5.2.3 GOD IS EXCLUSIVE / UNATTAINABLE

As well as the loving nature of God, many participants also explained that God is so perfect that he is unattainable or unreachable for human beings. Only God can choose to cross the great divide between his perfection and humanity's imperfection. Most participants used Biblical language to describe this characteristic of God, describing him as holy, righteous and just. In contrast, humanity's state is one of sinfulness and subsequent separation from God: a separation that is impossible for humanity to bridge. God's exclusivity exists both at a global level and at a personal level. Globally,

humanity's sinfulness excludes all people from the possibility of relationship with God, whilst at a personal level participants reflected on their own inability to "come into God's presence" due to their own sin. This sin was composed of both specific individual failings and faults that participants identified, together with a more generic sense of sinfulness that was also seen to exclude a person from drawing close to the perfection seen in God. Participants expressed that God's unreachable character was certainly seen in the absence of Christ, but there was also the feeling that even though Christ's death allowed participants to approach God, he remains unattainable as a feature of his character:

...just from my understanding of humanity and sin...in the spiritual sense we can't be in God's presence broken as we are... (5/3/6).

...and I can't approach God...I just, I understand that...I couldn't approach him without it [Christ's death] I'm just ...filthy (10/1/2).

Well only because he is holy...you could look at another illustration, you could say that if we came into God's presence we would be burnt up because we are not holy, right? We wouldn't be able to stand in his presence quite literally...the fact that we can is because Christ, in Christ we have the ability to stand, you know, because he can stand in God's presence... (3/8/2).

#### 5.2.4 GOD IS PUNITIVE

Participants often used language taken from the legal world to describe God's exclusivity and the "correctness" or "justice" of the gap between God and humanity. Not only is God righteous and holy, he is also a God of justice who accords consequences for people's actions. According to this logic, the offence caused to the holy and righteous God by humanity's sin is so great that God must respond by judging humanity for its sin. Subsequently, God's justice demands that punishment be given. Many participants expressed that because of the vast gulf between God's perfection and humanity's depravity, the only appropriate punishment that God could give is the death penalty. This death penalty is a consequence that exists for humanity corporately, but was also understood by many participants as a personal penalty that they would have to bear, were it not for the intervention of Christ who took on the sins of all people and so bore the punishment that people deserved.

So as a just judge I understand God needing um, the price to be paid...there has to be a cost because we're innately in rebellion against him...so the cross is his way of paying the price himself in real physical terms through Jesus' death and... paying the price that we owe, so that he can have a relationship with us again (5/3/6).

...Jesus, I believe that Jesus was punished for that, I believe that God punished Jesus for that... the wrath that should've been directed at me, did get directed at Christ, and so that effectively paid the penalty... (10/4/2).

### 5.2.5 GOD IS CONDITIONAL

The concept that God is conditional was present in participants' accounts about God's action in the world through Jesus. According to this concept, it is Jesus who bridges the gap between humanity and God and through his death on the cross pays the price required by the failure of sinful humanity. It is this action of Jesus that clears away the sin and allows God to be back in relationship with humanity. But this relationship is therefore conditional on Christ's death. A corollary to this is that relationship with God is also conditional on a person's acceptance of Jesus' death on their behalf. Most participants spoke of a time when they either made a personal confession of faith in Jesus as the one who has saved them, or of a growing awareness of this acceptance of Jesus' death for them. Participants saw their decision to accept and follow Christ as being central to God's decision to forgive their state of sinfulness and accept them in light of Christ's action. It follows also that only Christians have been saved by Jesus' action on the cross, and those who do not confess Christ as their saviour do not meet the condition for salvation set down by God.

Probably...decision-ish time would've been like when I was about three or four... I remember the process... my Dad's rather blunt about the connection between sin and hell and raised it when I was very young, when I knew enough...and I had plenty to think about, yeah... I remember praying very young... my memory is actually of actually praying in bed, like for forgiveness... and having a real recognition that I needed it... not the recognition that grew over the years but just a very simplistic need to get right with God... (5/1/2).

Because God is seen as conditional, some participants also spoke of an ongoing need to continue to meet the conditions set down by God in order to continue in a faithful life. Participants spoke of needing to bring others to know Christ because of concern for their futures. They also spoke of the need to serve God through acts of service in the

local church, the need to “give up” their desires for their lives and be submissive to God so as to serve his intentions for them instead, the need to behave in ways that were seen as being in line with the Bible, and the need to spend time reading the Bible and in prayer, seeking to be closer to God.

...but have struggled in the past to really believe that, that God could accept me...to feel like I need to do things in order to please God in order to make him happy, to make him love me... (4/5/5).

...we didn't want to, but again many are the plans... but I'm submissive... to his rule over my life and yeah, if there's anyone I want to possess me its Christ, you know I want to be possessed by him, I want intimacy with him I just want Christ... (9/13/8).

... and the thought of the consequences, for example for my parents, if they don't believe in Christ you know, that's just horrendous. So, that's very difficult...but I know the story's not over yet you know, and I know that I can trust God to do what's right (4/8/10).

One participant spoke of an internal struggle between an internalized message that drove him to seek God's approval, and an expressed belief that God was not conditional and there was therefore nothing he could do to earn favour with God. This quote illustrates the tension that existed for a number of participants between an expressed belief about God on the one hand and an internalized message about God on the other. For this participant, the belief that God was conditional was deeply internalized, creating a challenge for the participant who wanted to believe that God was unconditional:

...well, first of all, it's a corrective that I need to keep applying to myself in terms of I've got to stop thinking that I can do anything further to earn God's approval or you know, my life needs to be of a certain standard... it's a corrective to that, that's absolutely not true and the nitty gritty of how it hits me is that I can't go thinking that, that I must therefore start to do this to be OK before God or to have him approve my behavior – that's dealt with, that's done and its finished (10/11/3).

### **5.3 PARTICIPANT THEOLOGIES**

As has been discussed above, all participants had multiple layers of experiences that led to the formation of their perspectives of God. Much of this material will have been put in place within the early years of participants' lives, but the process of learning also

continued after childhood and each participant has continued to learn about God. While much of this learning is at the level of conscious factual learning, for example by listening to speakers at church, learning also continues at a more experiential level, through the practices of prayer and worship. Consequently, while many participants were able to articulate a range of beliefs and the reasons for holding these beliefs, they also at times used language such as “things felt right,” or “I just knew.” Thus, participants’ perspectives of God operated at several different levels, both in the realm of logical constructed thoughts and at the level of feelings and emotions. Because of the nature of the interview questions, these participant theologies all have their foundations in the perspectives of God held by participants, and most are related to the participants’ explanations of Jesus’ death on the cross. I will now present and explain some of the theological beliefs held by participants.

### 5.3.1 THE PROBLEM – THE GULF BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY

The concept of The Problem emerges from beliefs about the character of God on one hand and the state of humanity on the other. Participants who spoke about the holiness and righteousness of God also spoke about the complete unworthiness of humanity to approach God. This was expressed both in global terms, referring to the state of all humans, and also in terms of each participant’s perspective on their own state. Many participants spoke of being “unworthy,” “wrong” or “unable to approach God.”

I just always assumed that I was in the wrong, I’ve always assumed that with God I’ve always been in the wrong until I confessed and had God... invited God into my life... (7/2/3).

Some participants were able to identify the source of these feelings of failure and inadequacy in some early childhood experience or teaching, whereas for others the beliefs were explained from a theological perspective, referring to concepts such as the fall of Adam or “original sin.” Many participants also spoke of times in their lives when they had behaved in ways that they believed were wrong because they broke rules laid out by God and thereby contravened God’s plan for them, which had the consequence of separation from God’s presence. The problem also seems to reflect a perceived internal problem within the character of God. Participants spoke of the love and



relational nature of God, but also of God's inability to "look on" sin or to be in relationship with people because of the gulf between holiness and sinfulness.

God is perfect ... oh I hate to say the word can't, but I'm going to... so he can't be in relationship with sin... so, so our sin has destroyed that... and he's unreachable for us as humans, you know, apart from through Christ... (4/3/7).

Some participants expressed that the isolation was the result of God's inability to relate to humans due to their sin, whereas other participants thought that the isolation was the result of humanity being unable to approach God because of the effects of sin on people's behavior and inclinations. For most participants, the construction that follows from the problem is that something has to be done to bridge the gulf of isolation between a holy God and sinful humanity. Because humanity is incapable of doing anything to please God or bridge this gap, only God can do so. However, according to many participants, God cannot be in relationship with sinful humanity because of his exclusive holiness. Sin consequently causes God such grief that he must punish sinful humanity for causing the problem. However, because God wishes to be in relationship with humanity, he chooses to punish his own son rather than destroying humanity. In the crucifixion, Jesus takes on himself the sins of all humanity and bears the punishment that humanity deserved. In this act of love, Jesus removes the barrier between God and humanity and creates a situation where people can again freely come into his presence to be in relationship.

I understand it in terms of paying the penalty for what I deserved so its, you know the things, and I can't approach God...I just, I understand that...I couldn't approach him without it, I'm just ...filthy, so his death means that is washed away, that's gone... (10/1/2).

...it showed the Gospel story and it had like the two sides... with the big chasm in the middle and the cross bridged the gap between God on one side...[and us on the other]... (2/3/6).

...the first bit I understood about the Gospel... as I understood that the cross was the bridge across the chasm of sin you know...so that first made it sound plausible to me you know? (3/5/3).

Participants spoke about God as having to deal with the problem of separation from humanity and about Jesus being the solution to this problem. For most participants there was a distinct difference between the nature and role of God the father and Jesus

the son. God was seen to be isolated, distant and restricted by his holiness, whereas Jesus was presented as not being restricted in these ways, but rather as willingly taking on the sin of the world so as to solve the problem with the father. A few participants engaged with ideas of the Trinity, mainly to explain that because God is Trinity, the action of 'father' punishing 'son' was an act of love, as God was also present in Jesus as he suffered and died. Most participants, however, did not engage or explore ideas of Trinity with respect to the cross.

### 5.3.2 A PERSONAL PROBLEM

While most participants framed the problem as the tension between God and the whole of sinful humanity, it was explained most clearly as a personal problem. Participants explained that the death of Jesus had been intended for them personally, with the result being that they personally received forgiveness of their sins and were subsequently able to enter into a personal relationship with God, but only because of Jesus. Many participants reported that they had found a freedom because of their relationship with God, and this freedom meant that the laws that the Hebrew people were subject to no longer applied to them. Freedom also meant being able to approach God in prayer and worship with the confidence of knowing that their sins had been forgiven.

... I do believe in Jesus therefore I do believe that he died on the cross... I'm like, that's an amazing thing that God's done for me that allows me to live the life he's created me to live... without me getting stuck in rules and things that ... to pay him back for all the bad I've done in my life, or will do in my life you know. So probably, so for me him dying on the cross means freedom... (6/6-7).

For some participants, being forgiven for their sins was also good news because they believed that this also secured them a place in heaven in the future. Not being forgiven was generally seen as a negative situation, because it results in not being with God in heaven after death. Participants ranged in their opinions about this alternative, with some speaking of being sent to hell as a physical place, while other participants softened this idea somewhat and many said that they were unsure or uncomfortable about the alternative to heaven. Notwithstanding this, most participants had perceptions of heaven as a place where people go after death to be in God's presence, if they have accepted Christ as their saviour prior to their death.

Participants thus construed salvation primarily in personal terms. The death of Jesus had the effect of saving individuals, gaining them eternal life and setting them free from sin for a relationship with God. This salvation was seen, however, as dependent on a personal decision being made by the individual, acknowledging their sin, asking forgiveness and accepting this forgiveness through Jesus. Most participants referred to times in their lives when they had reached such a point of decision-making. Participants used various expressions to refer to these times, such as “making a decision,” “accepting Christ into my life,” “confessing my sin and asking for forgiveness,” and “asking Jesus into my heart.”

Making a decision explains a time in a participant’s life when they recall making a conscious choice to participate in a life of faith. For some, this event was clearly recalled, complete with the reasoning behind the decision. For others, making a decision involved a more general point of realization of something outside themselves, a point of change from which other decisions would later flow. For some, these early moments of cognizance were recognized and later reported by a parent:

...I’m not sure how that happened...my mother says its because of a visit to Christchurch Cathedral when I was 7 ...she felt then there was something happening ... we went to the Cathedral and I was there, and struck by something, I don’t know what, or who or how...(1/10/5).

For other participants, making a decision was a quite specific response to the teaching of the family or the wider church community and the need for a choice to be made in order to be a Christian:

Participant 5 who made a decision at age 4:

I remember the process... my Dad’s rather blunt about the connection between sin and hell and raised it when I was very young, when I knew enough...Yeah, yeah... and I had plenty to think about, yeah... I remember praying very young... (5/1/6).

I was brought up in a Christian home so I was brought up with godly principles, whatever, and at a children’s camp at age 10...I um, you know they were talking about the fact that you could invite Christ into your life and have your sins forgiven and all the...I sort of knew that from my family but actually made that stand...to have a relationship, so that was yeah, age 10... (13/1/2).

For one participant, the urging to make this decision was not from family, because her family was not Christian, but rather from an external organization:

Participant 4 at age 8:

I went to Girls Brigade and that was how I came to the Lord, you know they had devotions every week and that was when this man came and shared one day about how you could get to heaven and I wanted to get to heaven so I went home and prayed and put my faith in Jesus then... (4/1/1).

Other participants reached a point of making a decision a little later in life, and for some, this was after an earlier point of decision-making:

Participant 1 at age 15/16:

That was really... he was really an ideal opportunity for me... I'd come to the point in my own personal life where I wanted to identify more closely with Christ and Christ's way ... so the Billy Graham experience was really for me... an ideal opportunity for me to sort of burst forth in my Christian response, without believing much of what he said but glad to be able to go forward at the invitation... (1/10/5).

Some participants could recall multiple occasions when they had made such a confession of faith, for example, one participant joked that he had "gone forward" at a Billy Graham rally on at least three occasions. Others expressed that they could not think of a specific time of confession of faith, because their Christian faith had always been part of their experience. One such participant said he had always been a Christian and could not recall a specific time of making a decision, but instead remembered a number of important events:

I think there were a few, probably, moments like that, along the way, but not one that I could say, this is... I probably felt that way at each of those times... Baptism, water baptism... (17/1/7).

### 5.3.3 AN EXCLUSIVE SOLUTION

A corollary of the belief that salvation was a personal transaction a person experienced by accepting the forgiveness that God offered, was the belief that salvation is exclusive to those who accept Christ and God's forgiveness found in Christ. According to this notion, presented by most participants, only Christians are saved. Christians are defined as those who have made a confession of sin and accepted Christ as saviour, and those who have not done so cannot be saved. Being saved means being set free to have a

relationship with God in the present life, and also receiving the gift of eternal life with God. While God was seen as loving and desiring relationship with people, participants expressed that the only way for God to enter back into relationship with people was through the sacrificial death of Christ. The consequence is that only those who confess faith in Christ are able to be saved and have this relationship with God.

A number of participants expressed concern about this situation because they had family members or friends who were not Christians. The exclusive nature of salvation through Christ created an anxiety for those participants regarding the outcomes for their family members. For these participants, the need to accept Christ and be saved was seen as important because of the eternal consequences for not doing so. These eternal consequences were a much more important focus for these participants than any immediate benefits gained from following Christ and being in relationship with God. One participant, when asked whether there was anything else about the atonement that she would like to add, commented directly about her concern for her parents who were not Christians:

I guess one of the things that I've found the hardest is just so desperately wanting to see members of my family and friends come to understand, you know to be saved themselves and understand the atonement and just, you know it's a struggle why people just don't get it ... and for a long time I had, I did struggle with a lot of guilt of... you know, needing to be active in sharing my faith, in seeing other people come to the Lord and feeling this huge burden on me ... (4/8/8).

Another participant spoke more definitively about hell than most participants were willing to, and in doing so expressed concern about his need to speak more frankly with his brother:

...I mean a place of unimaginable torment, you know, that kind of thing. I say that and then I think of my brother... I think I've got alongside him a lot of times but I haven't spoken to him enough about that ... there are people that I must be more bold with ... I don't know the theological description of hell but its unimaginable and to not have these blessings ... maybe it's a place of total isolation you know, I can't imagine what it would be, all I know is that it would be without any good thing in this world and without God who is light and that's where I would've headed...(10/13/1).

A further outworking of An Exclusive Solution is that some participants spoke in black and white, exclusive terms about being a Christian or not, and what is involved in staying as a Christian as opposed to no longer being a Christian. In this conceptual world, people are either saved or they are not, and there is little, if any, space in between. For these participants, it is possible to lose the faith you might once have had, and in doing so, lose the salvation that was once yours. Similarly, wrong behavior or thinking could lead a saved person to a state where they might lose the salvation that had been won for them by Christ. Participants who expressed beliefs such as these used language such as “in or out,” or “reconciled to God or not.”

Being saved and consequently living a life of faith had positive consequences for participants, who reported that they gained peace, security and assurance from awareness of God’s presence and from knowing that he cares for and provides for them. Some participants’ anxiety for their non-Christian friends and family was because these people were seen to be at risk of missing out on God’s goodness. Some participants expressed that they wished to be reaching out to people “outside” the faith but found difficulty in some of these relationships, because of the problem of addressing the “in or out” nature of their faith. In a similar way, some participants expressed levels of fear of people or groups of people that they perceived to be “out.” “Being saved” or not being saved was a very clear way of demarcating between people’s status: even the term non-Christian, which was regularly used by participants, reflected the exclusive status of those who had “made a decision” and come “in.” Some participants also expressed questions about the status of other Christians because of observed behaviours, for example, one participant referred to his concern over a Christian friend who is trained as a Meditation teacher: “...but I mean Peter’s in question, he’s a lovely friend of ours but um, I worry for him...” (14/3/1).

#### 5.3.4 THE COST OF FOLLOWING

Participants were quick to point out that the forgiveness gained from Jesus’ death was a “free gift” given to anyone who puts their faith in him. According to this belief, there is nothing anyone can do to earn the forgiveness of God or work his or her way to a position of goodness that God finds acceptable. In keeping with the exclusive solution, forgiveness and salvation is only available because of Jesus’ death “for us.” Most

participants spoke about their relationship with God as being entirely due to God's love, goodness and personal forgiveness, being clear that the relationship could not have been possible were it to be based on their own merit.

... Jesus dying for me is the only way that I'm going to be approved... and have been approved by God, you know that that has happened because of what he's done, so I did... that means for me that there is nothing else that I can do, on top of that there's nothing day-by-day, week-by-week ... and, thank goodness, nothing I can do to jeopardise that... (10/1/2).

Having expressed this idea, however, many participants also spoke about the need to behave or perform in certain ways in response to the gift they had received. For many, this involved participating in overt disciplines such as reading the Bible, praying, attending church services, spending time in personal prayer and proselytizing family members and friends. Good performance also included avoiding sin in their personal lives. Sin in this context referred to specific acts that were seen as harming the relationship with God, which for participants included excessive drinking, use of drugs or sexual activities such as extra-marital sex or being distracted by inappropriate sexual thoughts.

The cost of following was also expressed by some participants as a need to hand over control of their lives to God. These participants felt that they needed to reduce their own desires for their lives and trust God to provide better circumstances for them. Participants spoke of "needing to trust him more," "handing over control" and "dying to self." Participants who spoke in these ways believed that God had a plan for their lives and that they needed to allow him to work out his plan for them by not allowing their own desires to get in the way. Participants used this concept to explain a number of situations where life circumstances had not worked out well for them but they still believed that God wanted to give them positive outcomes:

...but sometimes he whisks away the props to remind me that yeah, things are kinda shaky and He's the one who's got me, and if I can trust Him when there are no props then, yeah, that's why He's putting me through the things He's putting me through... (5/14/2).

... but in a general sense... I mean you pray for stuff and ....you know that it's the right thing to pray for and God should be giving it to... and he doesn't... I guess it comes back to having to trust that he knows best but that's not always the easiest thing to do in the moment... (8/12/4).

Well, and a dying because I find as I walk with Christ there's a dying to self and when I mean a dying to self, not that I'm losing part of myself but maybe a dying to the old nature... You know it's like this, I'm aware I'm being refined... (9/5/7).

A few participants felt that they had not received answers from God regarding the things they had hoped for, including relationships and physical healing. A strategy used by some participants to understand this situation was to claim that God's good plan for them was greater than they could understand and that they needed to grow in trust and faith that God would meet their needs. One participant spoke of her unmet desire to have a partner, explaining that though God had not met this need, she still believed that he intended good things for her life:

I mean when the answer is 'No' or 'Not yet,' clearly the lack of something is doing something good in my life, and, and receiving it would... that's not for myself or for anybody else involved, but the plan is and other times he does want to remind me that he hears me and he wants... even though its little things... (5/17/1).

Most participants expressed connection between faithfully following God by keeping his commands and staying in relationship with him, and the subsequent experience of God's provision and meeting their needs. The meaning participants gave to staying in relationship with God was that he would then continue to work out his good plans in the person's life, whilst moving away from relationship with him risked missing out on the good that God promised.

Many participants also spoke of the unconditional nature of God's love, that there was nothing they had done to deserve the freedom bought for them by Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Some of these participants also spoke of the expectations to perform as Christians, in order to meet the requirements they perceived God has for them. These participants did not appear to perceive these two perspectives as being in tension with each other.

## **5.4 LIVING BETWEEN THE LINES**

The major category "Living between the lines" explains how evangelical Christians construct their worlds to make sense of their perspectives of God and their theological



understandings. There are consequences that flow from the various beliefs, and these in turn have actions required to stabilize living between the lines. Living between the lines explains how participants view the world, the cross, God and the place they hold within this framework. Living between the lines is a state of immersion that participants enter through experience of faith in a church context. Usually, entry to this place of immersion occurs from a point of decision-making, or perhaps multiple points of decision-making in which participants have typically confessed their wrongdoing, invited Christ into their lives and asked him to be in charge. As noted previously, these points of decision-making may be at any stage of life: many participants made such a commitment at a young age. Some participants who made an early decision came to a point later in life after a time of being away from their faith, where they came back to God and asked him to take control of their life again. Having made such a decision, participants typically become involved in church life and in their own personal spiritual disciplines, usually becoming involved in the life of a local church, participating in worship and other activities, serving, and spending time with other Christians, often to the exclusion of other activities.

The most secure life outcome is seen as remaining between the lines and meeting the various conditions within the lines. Doing so means that the believer does not risk losing their salvation, thereby not making it to heaven. Also, remaining between the lines means that the believer will continue to have God's blessing: leading, guiding and providing for them. From between the lines, looking outward for believers can at times be an uncomfortable or scary situation. A risk is perceived outside: that a person who moves beyond the boundaries will lose the salvation that Christ has bought for them, lose the blessing that God intends for them, and lose the eternal life that is theirs after death. Moving outside the lines could involve not participating in the behaviours that define people inside, participating in behaviours that are not acceptable inside, or thinking about God and faith in ways that do not fit the theological parameters of inside. Notwithstanding these concerns, a large number of participants had experienced life to some degree outside the lines. Some had returned from this time in their life to re-engage in immersion inside, while others remained outside in one way or another.

Staying between the lines was described by participants using language that indicated compliance or submission. Participants reported that they accepted the experiences of

their lives as being God's plan for them, and those who had experienced difficult events tended to explain these as God having a greater plan for them; a plan they could not currently see, but would accept in faith. This acceptance was summarized by a participant who, having talked about her unmet desire to have a partner in life, concluded, "...but yeah, God has a reason in it all" (5/10/10). This acceptance of God's plan extended further for some participants to an unwillingness to question God, or their conceptions of God, due to the perception that God had everything completely under control. One participant said, "'I don't question his ways so much..." (14/3/3), while a common answer to interview questions was along the lines of, "That's an interesting question... I haven't really thought about that much..." A number of participants indicated that their identity was so tied up with their Christian beliefs that they couldn't imagine living without God in their lives. One such participant expressed this as "God is so intertwined with me" (7/11/3), while another had difficulty thinking about her life without God: "it's tricky because it's hard to figure out what I would be without [God]" (5/10/10). Participants who were clearly between the lines usually referred to the Bible as authoritative for their lives.

Participants who were between the lines, generally used exclusive language to describe the experience of being between the lines. From this perspective, participants saw themselves as being in as opposed to those who were out, a distinction that was a clear choice, rather than a continuum of positions. One participant expressed this clearly when she said:

I mean that's kind of classic... a kind of black and white way of viewing relationship with God, you know, do we, are we reconciled to God or not? Have we had our sins forgiven or not? And there's this or that [participant indicates two extremes with her left and right hands], and ... there's not a lot of journey perhaps... (2/3/7).

Furthermore, although being between the lines refers to the present life of some participants, it also has ongoing implications for life after death:

I mean, people are making a choice here in this life, whether they want God or not, and if they choose to go their own way then they reap the consequences of that, which is a life in eternity without him, whatever that means... (4/9/1).

### 5.4.1 MAINTAINING THE BOUNDARIES

Living between the lines requires a range of actions in order to stay within the boundaries. Boundaries relate both to what participants believe and also whether their actions are in accordance with the expectations of their faith community. Boundaries related to beliefs may be adhering to the core evangelical beliefs about the nature of God, the work of Christ and the place of the Bible. In addition, faith communities usually have expectations of the sorts of activities that fit within the accepted boundaries and it is important for people between the lines to have congruence with the expectations of their community. In order to maintain these boundaries, participants engaged in a number of activities, including being a member of a church fellowship and participating in the life of the church, particularly through service; talking about their faith to remind and reinforce the messages that were presented by church officials; speaking about their faith to other people to encourage them to make a decision to follow Christ and join the church between the lines; submitting to God's rule and authority in their lives in order to be congruent with God's plan for them; living by the rules of behavior which determine what is acceptable and what is not; and having beliefs that fit within the acceptable beliefs of the church being attended.

Perhaps the most defining boundary is the idea of being in or out of the faith, where being in results in salvation, relationship with God, eternal life, healing and wholeness and being out excludes the person from all of those good things. Such a contrast of positions is so compelling that most participants did not consider crossing the boundaries to be of any worth. However, some were doing so in small ways in terms of their questioning of some of their beliefs, and many had done so in more significant ways at other times in their lives. In the next chapter we will be turning to consider what happens outside the lines: why and how participants had made that journey, what happened there, and how and why they made the return journey.

## 5.5 CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have presented and discussed a range of beliefs about God held by participants, including that God is relational, restorative, exclusive/unattainable, punitive and conditional. Using examples from participants, I then explained four

important theologies held by participants that express something of their view of God and understanding of his working in the world. These theologies were that the problem humanity and God face is that there is a gulf that separates the two; that this is a personal problem because it means that each individual is separated from God and will remain so; that there is a solution that God has provided by sending Christ to die so that each person can be accepted by God and enjoy a relationship with him; and finally, that this arrangement means that believers need to respond to the gift they have received by submitting to God's rule in their lives. Living between the lines was discussed as being the best way of life for a believer: a life of adherence to the boundaries of faith.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Research Findings 3**

### **Patterns in the Thinking Space**

#### **6.1 INTRODUCTION**

Living between the lines explains the ways that participants in this study perceive God and construct their beliefs, and the consequences of these as believers make decisions about the ways they will live their lives. For an evangelical, a decision to follow Christ marks the entry point to life between the lines whereby the person joins a community of faith and can consider themselves as having been saved. When living between the lines a believer experiences congruence between their own personal beliefs and the beliefs of the community of faith, and there also congruence between the person's experience of life and the messages of their faith community. This congruence means that the believer stays connected to the community and lives between the boundaries that delineate a faithful life. Living a Christian life is seen as living between the lines of beliefs and life experiences that the community of faith proclaims. Staying between the lines is an important dimension of an evangelical Christian life, and as has been explained earlier, there are a number of strategies used to maintain both the beliefs and life experiences that mark a life between the lines.

However, data analysis from participants in this research demonstrated that many evangelical Christians do in fact move across the boundaries, which led to the generation of a second category, "Patterns in the thinking space." This category was generated from concepts that explain the processes that were going on for participants who moved outside the lines. When conditions arose that caused disconnection between a participants' beliefs or life experiences and their faith community's expectations, the lack of congruence led to a thinking space where the believer might address this disconnection. As a result, shifts occurred which led to strategies for change. For participants, these strategies had many different characteristics, varying in intensity, duration and focus. Participants who had experienced these sorts of shifts found themselves in a range of situations outside the lines, some still in a faith community but questioning their beliefs, others outside the faith community but still holding their

beliefs, and still others away from a community of faith and also disengaged from their beliefs. For some of these participants, subsequent changing conditions led to further times in a thinking space, from where they had further shifts that led, most usually, to strategies to re-engage with their faith and with a community of faith. For some other participants, however, time outside the lines continued for a longer period and some participants were in a state of disconnection at the time of interview. These patterns “in the thinking space” are represented in Figure 2, and in this chapter I will be explaining the concepts that underlie the development of the category, again using quotes from participants to illustrate the development of these concepts.

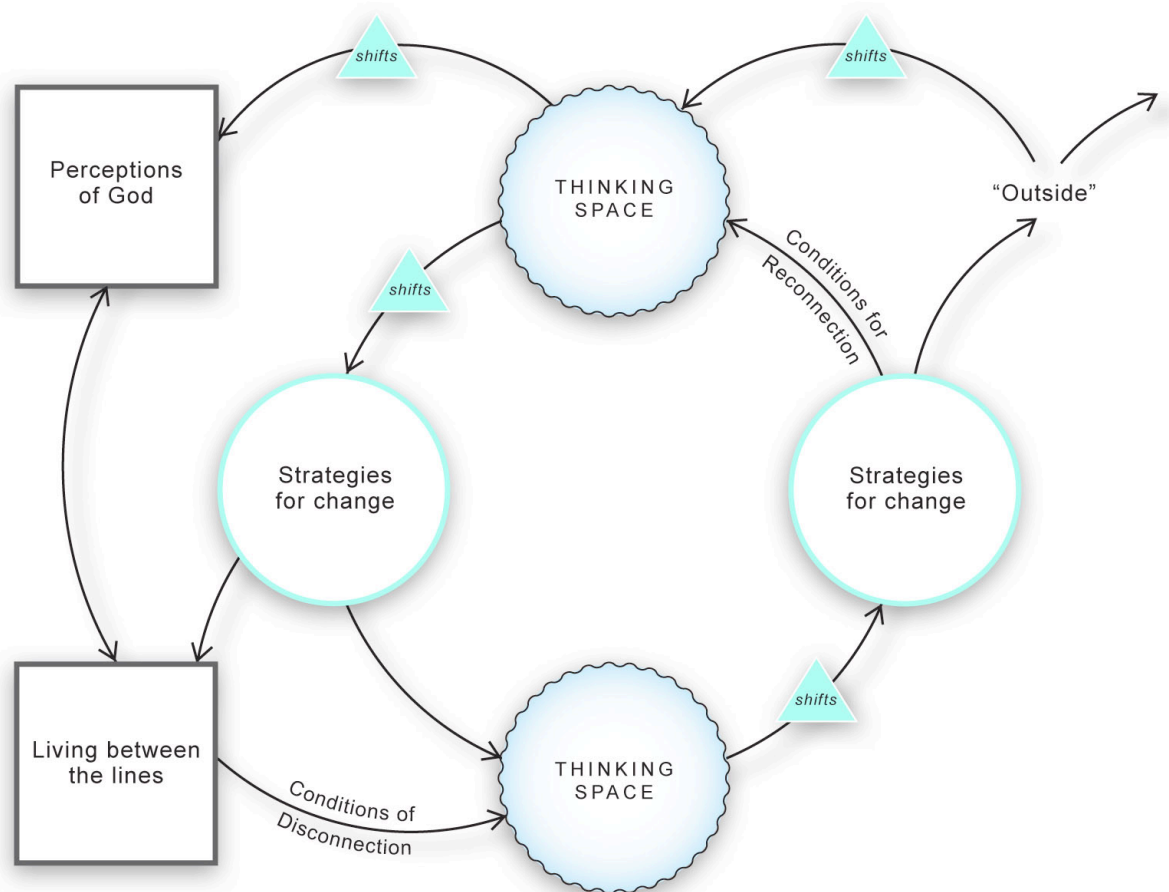


Figure 2: Patterns in the Thinking Space

## 6.2 CONDITIONS OF DISCONNECTION – LIFE OUTSIDE THE LINES

Some participants appeared to live completely between the lines, experiencing congruence between their beliefs and life experiences and what they explained as the

patterns and expectations of their faith community. However, a large number of participants had experienced conditions that had caused disconnection for them: either disconnection between their personal beliefs and the beliefs of their faith community, or disconnection between their experiences in life and the expectations of their faith community. These disconnections arose from a variety of conditions and led participants to a thinking space, where they re-evaluated their beliefs and life experiences in a new way. In this section I will explain the conditions that give rise to disconnection and entry to the thinking space, namely: non-conformity, life stages, unmet expectations, isolation and crisis.

### 6.2.1 NON-CONFORMITY

The first concept related to the thinking space is that some participants expressed that they had always felt that their approach to their faith was different to evangelical norms. These participants had spent considerable periods of their lives involved in evangelical churches and para-church organisations, but expressed that they had always felt uncomfortable with aspects of the church's beliefs. These participants were not able to identify the source of their disconnection, but reported having felt different in some way from a very young age. For one participant, this disconnection had its roots in his perception of a militaristic tone within the church, both in the military banners hung in a local Cathedral and in singing hymns such as "Onward Christian Soldiers." This participant said that he had always felt uncomfortable with such images and that subsequently his thinking about God had always avoided any imagery of violence, including his thinking about the cross. Another participant, who made a public confession of faith as a teenager at a Billy Graham rally, spoke of not "falling for the myth" and rejecting "the bilge" of a local evangelical group. For these participants there appeared to be a deep-seated aversion to conformity to common evangelical perspectives on God. Though they were unable to articulate the sources of these aversions, it appears that they come from very early experiences in the participants' families of origin. The strategy utilized by these participants involved distancing themselves from participation in churches that expressed strong evangelical "black and white" opinions, preferring rather to belong to churches that held more open and inclusive perspectives on God:

I guess there's been something in me, in my core that's been like this forever... like when I was at university where I was involved in the Pentecostal renewal sort of era back in the seventies and some people there were hellfire and brimstone... you're doomed and... burn in hell, and there were others who just loved everybody and the ones that I was associated with were very much in the 'love thy neighbour' kind of camp and you know, 'judge not lest you be judged,' and so I guess I've always migrated to the, to the end of the spectrum that, where I feel like I fit in... (11/5-6).

### 6.2.2 LIFE STAGES

Some participants expressed that they had experienced significant times of disconnection at specific times in their lives, most notably during the teenage years, a life stage that is often a time of difficult-to-negotiate transitions. For these participants, the teenage years were a time of questioning the strongly conservative beliefs of their upbringing, comparing themselves with friends who were not Christians, challenging the life-style expectations of the churches they belonged to and questioning the existence and relevance of God. Such conditions arose for many participants, but the responses of some were stronger and gave rise to significantly greater problems than for others. For these participants, disconnection was encountered between their experience of life and the expectations of their community of faith, experienced primarily through their parents. Not attending church was all that was involved for some, but for others this led to participating in activities that the participants knew their parents and their church would not approve of. Some of these participants ended up living their lives with no church connection for a number of years. However, all participants in this situation spoke about their relationship with God during this time, even if it was in terms of trying to prove that God did not exist. As one participant, who had married and had two children as a teenager, put it, "I was always aware of God but I was trying to block him out you know..." (13/1/2). Another participant spoke of her decision as a teenager to behave in ways that were contrary to both her parents' expectations and her own beliefs:

... when I decided to just do my life in whatever form it took in terms of rebellion, sin... I did it very knowingly, and almost in relationship with God... I didn't deny him for a second! He was right there and I was doing it ... it was like, 'You with me? This is what's happening' (15/5/3).



The teenage years were also described by a number of participants as a time when they started thinking about the faith they had grown up with and wondering what it meant to them personally. This was most common during the transition from school to university, which was described by participants as a time when they questioned their beliefs and sought to establish their own perspectives rather than relying on what had been learnt during childhood. All participants who experienced this sort of disconnection later returned to their own adult faith. One participant spoke of this type of journey at the end of her secondary school years:

...I'd been through phases of like, very Pentecostal, very going on Operation Jerusalem type mission type things and then realized actually I don't know what I really stand for and it was almost like I went through a phase of wanting, of seeing everyone around me living without God and having a really great life, I was like, I can probably do that too... so, as I started exploring that more and more and hanging out with my friends and kind of doing this whole trying to prove that God wasn't real almost, cos I'd grown up with always being told he is real (6/1-2).

Other participants also described changing patterns of belief related to maturing into a later stage of life. These participants spoke of questions arising for them about beliefs that used to be central but which were being examined for the first time, and related these changes to growing into an older phase of life. For some of these participants, such questioning was actually triggered by questions during the interview, indicated by responses such as "I haven't thought about that..." or "That's interesting, I'll have to think about that." One participant, who had been faithfully living between the lines her whole life with very little questioning of the norms of her church, commented:

I've probably changed a little bit from being focused continually on the death of Christ ... I'm not negating in any way, the fact that that is the crucial point to our faith ...but there's been a little change in my head perhaps in terms of ... more that we don't need to always be on that point as much as what God wanted to be able to happen for us to achieve in our lives in you know, in relationship to us... I think that the relationship that stems from that is more central as we continue to move through life...(2/1-2).

### 6.2.3 UNMET EXPECTATIONS

Participants spoke about the promises that their faith made to them as believers. Some of these promises stemmed from the participants' beliefs in God and understanding of

his promises to them, and some of the promises came from the claims of participants' churches, other Christian organisations, and from the leaders in those communities. Generally, these promises were encouraging and uplifting, giving strength and encouraging believers to continue to live faithful lives. Some participants, however, reported that they experienced feeling let down because certain promises had not been met or expectations realized. For these participants, disconnection came about as they came to the realization that something they had hoped for as a result of their faith did not in fact appear to be coming to fruition.

Participants who experienced this sort of disconnection all spoke about having high expectations that their faith and the church could bring about significant changes for the good. For some, these changes related to their personal circumstances, while for others they were about the ability of the church to bring about positive change in society. At the personal level, participants reported how they expected that their faith would bring about personal healing and wholeness. These expectations were based on Biblical messages that Jesus came to redeem and heal, and also on church teaching that strongly promoted the ability of Christ to heal those who believe in him. One participant who had struggled for 10 years with a debilitating medical condition said:

...so, no, Jesus... didn't heal me like I wanted for all those years... I remember just going to constant healing meetings and you get sick of that crap after a while 'cos... its horrible to... get your hope up when some healer's coming around and they pray for everyone, they heal everyone except for you and then you go home disappointed, it's the constant cycle so that's... essentially why I left, after a number of years of trying... why I got sick of that typical look of church 'cos I was like... I'm not doing this any more... (19/4/1).

Another participant spoke directly about her expectations of redemption being found in the cross. She believed that Jesus came to save, to redeem people from their circumstances, but didn't experience any such redemption herself in the midst of some very challenging circumstances:

And, what is love, and how is this cross helping ...to redeem in real life? And it didn't...for a long, long time it complicated things terribly to the point where actually it was, I could almost say it was antithetical to a full life, the burden of it was immense, the conflict it created was debilitating, the awareness of it was just...hell! To be aware of this flaming cross! ...And, there were some pretty, severely bleak times... just dark times, dark times, an awareness of a hope that never arrived in the cross, of a redemption, of a resolution, of a relief that just

never transpired, through the church, you know, through friends, through the vehicles it should've. I couldn't feel part of those institutions; I was so peripheral and so conflicted... (15/4/4).

Other participants expressed disillusionment around their expectations that the church should be able to bring about significant improvements in the quality of life experienced by others. One such participant, who was involved in a church programme in a poor community, explained that after a while he became resentful that the changes he believed could be brought about through faith, were not in fact occurring:

So that resentment built up because of my expectations on Christianity to deliver... There was no evidence, anywhere around me, in my immediate, like in the world where I was trying to live and breathe and give Jesus' life into ... this community context, and there was no evidence of that happening... so the resentment, the resentment was built up because when I took the Christian faith I took it as truth...and part of that truth was that I believed that Christ and his cross work could save...but what I realized about myself was that it hadn't saved me... (18/6-7).

#### 6.2.4 ISOLATION

Some participants experienced disconnection as a result of a period in their lives when they were isolated for some reason from a community of faith. This was usually due to a geographical move followed by difficulty finding a church community where they felt comfortable. The initial physical isolation later became a choice to remain isolated and the lack of connection to a church community then created a space where the participants were not so constrained in their beliefs as they were when connected to a church. This allowed time for a reconsideration of the beliefs and values that had, up to that point, been foundational beliefs.

Some participants recounted how they found that not attending a church for a time allowed them to re-evaluate some of the beliefs that were central to their lives. These participants, having grown up in the church and having attended church all their lives, spoke of their church experience as being "in a bubble" where all the language made sense at the time. However, after experiencing a physical isolation from a church community, they began to question what they had considered normal "inside the bubble," and they began to experience that what had been normal no longer made sense. At the same time, they realized that what they had considered normal also did not make

sense to those outside the church “bubble.” As time went by, what started as a physical isolation began to become more isolation based around their questioning of what they had previously believed. As an example, two participants spoke of a fear that they had lived with during their time in church, which was generated by continued references to sin and the need for sins to be forgiven by the atoning blood of Jesus. They found that being away from this teaching had given them the opportunity to feel less fearful, which was of real benefit to them.

...so I think that if you're constantly fearful and feeling guilty, the idea of Jesus saving... to pay for your sin is a really enticing concept, and I think, I think that fear and guilt is something that I guess after moving away from church is something that we probably feel less and so there's less of a need to feel the saving grace of Jesus....(17/6/7).

### 6.2.5 CRISIS

Some participants experienced a time of crisis in their lives that shook the foundations of their beliefs, resulting in disconnection from life between the lines. For one participant, the loss of a relationship with a Christian man caused “heartbreak” that resulted in “distracting me from my walk of faith,” and subsequently led to a short-lived marriage to an abusive man of another faith. For another participant, the break-up of her marriage following her husband's infidelity was a catalyst that resulted in a great deal of soul-searching, in particular with respect to her understanding of God and what Jesus' death on the cross was all about. This participant came to confront her previous notions of forgiveness and anger within the framework of her beliefs about God:

I guess it made me think about God in a new way ... for me that was my journey toward forgiveness was to actually realize ... there was no way to let something that big go, but to realize that justice had been done for... and that when Jesus died on the cross for my sins he died on the cross for their sins too... (8/2/5).

## 6.3 THE THINKING SPACE

The thinking space is a central concept that clearly lies at the heart of the category “Patterns in the thinking space.” It describes occasions when participants began to think about some of the perspectives they have held about God and the beliefs they had constructed about the ways God works in the world. The commonly accepted

evangelical perspectives and beliefs have been discussed in Chapter 2, and act as boundaries that define living between the lines. When participants begin to question aspects of those beliefs in some way, they enter the thinking space. This thinking space for some participants explains times of cognitive restructuring, whereas for other participants the thinking occurred more at an emotional than cognitive level with participants referring more to their feelings changing than to their thoughts or beliefs changing. Thinking space also includes participants who did not, on the surface, talk about a thinking process that they went through. Rather, the thinking space explains a process that occurred for all people who moved away from the boundaries of beliefs or experiences that are common between the lines.

Some participants' description of the thinking space was at the level of small adjustments they were making to their thinking about God. These participants were, for the majority of their beliefs, within the boundaries, but were experiencing questions or challenges to some belief they had held from childhood. One participant expressed that "its not black and white anymore" (7/3/1), which was an indicator of a shift in her thinking about God. Another participant expressed that her thinking had been changing over a number of years with regard to how she saw God. She was quick to point out that she still believed the important and essential truths about God, but expressed that something was changing for her: "Its not that my fundamental thinking has changed, its just perhaps, the way it kind of incorporates in my life has just changed in kind of focus..." (2/4/7). Another participant appeared to enter into the thinking space during the interview when she was explaining some of her beliefs about the holiness of God, but stopped and said, "It doesn't sound right but..." (7/10/5).

Other participants entered the thinking space in a more dramatic fashion, having made a choice to live without acknowledging God. For these participants, 'thinking' amounted to a choice to experience life outside of the previously accepted norms of their faith community. The thinking space became a place of tension between, on the one hand, the beliefs of the faith community, and, on the other hand, the desire of the participant to live life according to a new and different set of standards. Participants who experienced this kind of change had not somehow removed God from their lives: rather, they explained that they tried to do so, but were unsuccessful. They were able, of course, to live their lives in the ways they chose, but did not move to a place where they were no

longer aware of God. As one participant put it, “I was always aware of God but I was trying to block him out you know...”(13/1/2). Another participant explained that she had observed friends “living without God and having a great life,” so had decided to join them in their lifestyle, “kind of doing this whole... trying to prove that God wasn’t real almost, ‘cos I’d grown up with always being told he is real” (6/2/1).

Some participants who entered the thinking space did so around specific beliefs that had proved difficult for them, or that they had come to question. Often, these particular questions reflected a wider thinking, but participants expressed confusion around the specific belief as being central to their bigger story. One participant found in the thinking space that she started to question the “In or out” dogma of between the lines when she started interacting with a large number of people who were not Christian. This participant had spent much of her life in what she described as a church “bubble,” surrounded mostly by Christian friends. When a move introduced her to a new group of non-church friends, the accepted notion that those who have not confessed faith in Christ are not saved began to seem untenable:

... its literally me just meeting people and thinking that they’re great, amazing people...don’t have the same belief system that I’ve grown up with that I believe in or believed in whatever, how can we... how can I possibly come to terms with this concept of ‘I’m OK, I’m saved’ but you’re screwed, because you don’t yet believe that Jesus died on the cross for you... for me, that didn’t sit right anymore... straight away you started going well crap, hang on, how does this work, and it doesn’t make sense anymore, all of a sudden all of that information doesn’t translate anymore ... (16/12/1).

For one participant, the thinking space was multi-layered, full of many difficult questions and concerns. This participant’s story highlights the complexity of the thinking space in that he had many different experiences of Christian faith, was a leader among his church peers, combined an early upbringing in a Pentecostal home with later degree-level study at a Bible College, and still subsequently struggled with the relevance of his faith. Having left the church and entered a phase of what he described as ‘self-destructive’ behavior, the participant finally came to a point where he was able to identify that he had been driven all his life by a search for approval, and that much of his achievement within the faith community had been for the purpose of finding this approval:

... only after... awful stuff did I come to the realization that my Christian journey was about a search for approval probably to do with the parent, in some way...it was an inauthentic faith experience...it looked authentic...it had the legs, it had the talk, it had the tongues it had everything! It had the theology degree – it had the works, like the whole thing was there... all of it was about this desperate need for approval, and I had found a mechanism that would substitute ...Christianity if I did it well, would get me applause...(18/7/1).

Another participant went through a similar, although different, process of finding personal healing following the breakup of her marriage. This participant had for years believed that anger was wrong, that to be angry would be a disappointment to God. As she engaged in the thinking space she learned a new perspective on anger and a new understanding of God's response to her pain and anger. She expressed that she encountered healing in this process, that:

... it taught me a lot about God and taught me... he doesn't make things that are bad, he didn't give us a sense of anger because it was a bad thing that we should get rid of... it's a tool that we need to use wisely... (8/3/10).

## **6.4 STRATEGIES**

When participants experienced conditions that led to a disconnect between their beliefs or experiences and those of their community of faith, the thinking space was a common experience, though as has been illustrated above, it took many different forms for participants. What always transpired was that participants would utilize various strategies to make sense of, and respond to the triggering conditions. Strategies were actions put in place to help participants make sense of their changing conditions and respond to the changes resulting from the thinking space. Some examples of specific strategies were outlined in the previous section; what I will do here is explain the core dimensions of participants' strategies: duration, intensity and focus.

### **6.4.1 DURATION**

Strategies varied on a continuum from brief actions lasting only for a short time to long-term actions lasting for many years. In general, brief strategies tended to also be lower in intensity. Brief strategies are illustrated by the participants who expressed having questions about some aspect of their faith, for example the participant who, in response

to one question said, “But I guess I’ve started to, like, in my own head just start to think...” (2/2/3). Another participant, after listening to a speaker who challenged his conventional evangelical understanding of substitutional atonement, reflected that he had immediately gone back to read the first three chapters of John Stott’s *The Cross of Christ* in order to re-establish his thinking on the subject. Many participants also expressed questions about some aspect of their beliefs, but almost like a shrug of the shoulders or a raised eyebrow, the moment would pass and acceptance of the status quo would return. Many participants also expressed that some aspects of thinking about God are so challenging it is easier to take the approach of “God is in control so I just believe.” During interviews, there were many occasions where participants responded to a question by saying something like, “That’s an interesting question, I haven’t thought about that but I will...”

Strategies also related to the congruence of participant’s experiences with the norms of their faith community. One participant expressed that there were still occasions in her life when she would drink more than she would like to, subsequently causing her to feel a little regretful:

I don’t feel condemned by that, its just like... probably could’ve been a bit more considerate of people... so it kind of just makes me think, ‘Am I living the best version of my life? You know, is this what God created me to do? Is this the ultimate version of me?’ (6/16/3)

A number of participants spoke similarly of occasionally behaving in a way that they felt was not consistent with living between the lines. This also occurred with thoughts that participants felt were not appropriate. In these circumstances participants would report that they could confess whatever had been wrong, believe that they were forgiven for their failing, and therefore return to living between the lines.

Many participants experienced much longer duration, with many referring to months or years of being outside of the lines. For many participants, an early experience of questioning their faith led to a time when they were less invested in their beliefs and in the expectations of a faith community. Subsequently, these participants married partners who were similarly disconnected from a faith community, and they then had a number of years of being outside the lines and away from active participation in a community of faith. For all participants in this situation, return to a community of faith



did not come about until their relationship had ended, with the difficulty of this situation then providing the impetus for these participants to re-engage with their beliefs and in some cases to re-enter life between the lines.

#### 6.4.2 INTENSITY

Strategies for responding to conditions also varied on a continuum of intensity. This concept explains that some strategies were relatively small adjustments to a participant's beliefs or actions, whereas other strategies were extremely significant movements away from previous beliefs and experiences, even to the extent of denying beliefs that had once been central to their experience, together with leaving the communities of faith that had once been a source of support, guidance and strength. These major shifts often put participants in conflict with family members and friends who disagreed with their actions, as was expressed by the participant who said, "... my poor father, I'm surprised I didn't give him, actually give him a heart attack after moving out of home and telling him I was, you know I was seeing a boy...and moving in with my friends, one of which was a stripper..." (6/2/1).

For a number of participants, the conditions that had precipitated their actions were harmful and these participants exhibited actions that had elements of self-harm, including addictions to alcohol, drugs and abusive relationships. Several participants spoke of these situations, describing the extremity of their experiences as "very self-destructive, awful stuff" (18/7/1), and "... it was just terrible, it was horrific" (15/8/3).

For some participants, a combination of long duration and high intensity strategies took them to a place in their lives when they were a long way from connection to a faith community for a long time. In these long periods of time outside the lines, participants experienced God in three different ways: either denying God, ignoring God or accepting God. Participants who ignored God had reached a point in their lives where they had become disinterested in faith and were not actively engaged in their faith. As a result, when they met partners who were not between the lines this did not prove a barrier to their relationships. In these situations, God was not actively denied or rejected, more simply the participant was just not interested and so matters of faith were not considered in the prospective relationship. Other participants made a conscious choice

to deny God's presence in their lives, to set out to disprove his existence through finding happiness without God's involvement. Other participants chose to act in ways that would not be accepted between the lines, knowing that their actions were not what they believed God wished for them, and accepting that they were making a choice that was not the best for them. These participants continued in conversation with God throughout these times. One participant referred to himself as a "rebellious Christian," because he still believed in God but had made a conscious decision to do nothing that he saw as serving God.

While these sorts of strategies generally had negative connotations for participants, a more positive permutation also exists and this was expressed as "freedom." Some participants said that their beliefs set them free from adherence to rules and restrictive religious practices. They were quick to point out that this did not release them into inappropriate behaviours, because they did not want to engage in those behaviours anyway. More importantly, they felt free from the bondage of having to behave in the ways expected of those living between the lines. Other participants experienced freedom more in terms of the beliefs they held about God, and these participants felt that they were free to think more openly about God than they had at other times in their lives.

Some participants experienced being in an extended time away from their beliefs or church in a way that they felt excluded. I interviewed four participants who were not attending church and were questioning their beliefs. Each of these participants asked me why I would want to interview them, given that they "no longer believe." And yet, in each of these participants I found deep thinking and profound processing of their beliefs and the journey each had been on. Their perspective was that they were clearly "outside," yet my perspective of their position was that they are each on a journey of faith, currently in a different position to where they had been, and with a yet-to-be defined future.

### 6.4.3 FOCUS

The final concept to consider here is the participants' focus. Aspects of these have been covered in the previous sections due to the overlap between these concepts, however I will expand further here. Strategies described by participants had two main foci. The

first focus was concerned primarily with rethinking aspects of beliefs about the nature of God held by the community of faith or with a disconnect between the experiences of the participant and the expectations of their community of faith. Accordingly, some participants spoke about strategies they had employed to distance themselves from the beliefs of living between the lines, while others spoke about lifestyle choices they had made that involved actions that were outside the normal expectations of a life between the lines. While it is true that these two possibilities did occur together for some participants, it is also true that they do not have to co-occur and some participants exhibited only disconnection of beliefs, whilst other participants experienced disconnection of their actions, but somehow managed to maintain their beliefs at the same time. The many participants for whom disconnection was purely with regard to the perspectives they held about God, described their beliefs changing, and in some instances their relationship with the community of faith also changed, but these participants continued living in ways that were consistent with the expectations of their community of faith. Some of these participants were able to hold variations of belief and theology within a conservative church environment, continuing to act in ways that were consistent with their church's expectations. Others, however, reported no longer attending conservative churches because the widening gap between their beliefs and the church's beliefs created an uncomfortable dissonance. A small number of participants maintained the conservative beliefs of a life between the lines, but due to some difficult life circumstances ended up taking actions that would not normally be acceptable for someone living a congruent life between the lines. These participants experienced difficult marriages with people who did not hold similar faith beliefs and these marriages eventually ended. Throughout this time however, these participants held on to many of the conservative beliefs of their earlier years, despite the lack of shared beliefs with their partners. A final group of participants reported diverging from their early life between the lines in both their beliefs and the actions they chose. Rather than re-evaluating their beliefs about God, these participants tended to reject or ignore what they had previously believed, at the same time taking actions that were also inconsistent with a life between the lines.

The second focus concerned a distinction between participants' relationship with God and their relationship with the community of faith. While participants who had experienced a period of saying they no longer believed in God usually discontinued

attending church, many participants who had disconnected from their church reported continued activities with respect to God. Participants who fell into this second group reported continuing to engage in relationship with God, although their understanding of God certainly changed during these times. Several participants reported having conversations with God during times in their lives when they were not attending any church and were living in circumstances that would normally be understood as outside the lines. These participants spoke of inviting God into their lives to participate in all of the difficulties that they were experiencing. As one participant reported, he remained Christian, and chose not to return to church because of the church's impact on his mental health:

It literally mentally keeps me healthy whereas that stuff will push me back...it just, its not what I want... I still know lots of serving Christians, that's how I phrase them 'cos I'm not a serving Christian anymore, but I still know a lot of them and they're really cool, we still talk but um... (19/17/9).

Other participants who had held very conservative views of God expressed very different perceptions of God following their departure from church, but were still clearly open to working out what God might mean for them in their life post-church:

... for me I feel like God, whoever, whatever, he, she, it is ...I don't have an issue with saying they're everywhere, like the concept of a ubiquitous spiritual being isn't that far out for me, because I look at things, experience things, see things, whatever, and I can't explain them and so I feel like its something bigger...that's where God is for me now. How that relates to Jesus is another story, 'cos I don't know about that... (16/14-15).

## **6.5 CONDITIONS FOR RECONNECTION**

Participants who moved from a life between the lines to a life outside the lines faced a range of life experiences and some of them subsequently made decisions to make changes. For some, this meant returning to a life between the lines that was similar to the life of faith they had previously experienced. For other participants, their return was to a different type of faith, more characterized as being in the thinking space, but reconnected to a community of faith. For all these participants, their changes were in response to various conditions that arose and acted as triggers to encourage the participants to reconnect with their beliefs and their experience of a faith community.

### 6.5.1 CRISIS

Many participants who spent some time away from life between the lines, came to a point in life where they made new choices, reconnected with their beliefs, and subsequently re-examined their lifestyle choices and took steps to re-align these with a faith community. For most participants, this time of reconnection was precipitated by a crisis. A number of participants had come to a point in a relationship that they acknowledged as being unhealthy for them, but struggled to get out of that relationship and move ahead with their lives in a way they wanted. These participants spoke both of their awareness that their lives were not what they wanted for themselves and an awareness of God and a hope that God could help them resolve their relationship difficulties. One participant spoke of coming to a point after years of struggling in her marriage, where she asked God to help her: "OK God...take over please!" and I asked, I asked God to help me... like the difference from not walking with him and walking with him was...just so incredible" (13/1/2), while another participant became aware that her partner was not who she wanted to have children with and so she prayed to God, asking "I need an out, from my relationship and from the situation I'm in cos I don't want to be like this for ever" (6/3/5). Another participant described her journey from unhealthy relationships back to wholeness, but this was a difficult path given a background of childhood sexual abuse and adult self-harm. This participant participated in a programme that helped her, returned to live with her parents in a different city to her previous partner and took a long journey towards recovery:

...I was away from home still and I was entrenched with this guy who was just...oh, just the devil incarnate and I couldn't get out of that, so ended up, up here with him and to extricate myself, then another relationship ended up living with another guy, knowing that's not what you do... after the marriage dissolution and living with various men I finally came back to my parent's home... anyway, I did Living Waters again, I broke up with this man, and I did Living Waters again, and you know they say, they say the cross is about sacrifice, well...literally stripped bare, I was absolutely stripped ...of everything that a conventional life would require to look conventional ... so, it was me and Jesus, and I would often just be on the floor in the foetal position just sobbing through grief... (15/8/3-5)

For another participant, the crisis came through the unexpected death of a son's friend. At the time, the participant was living a 'party life-style' involving regular marijuana use, and he had made a promise to God that if his son were to die he would go "off to the

monastery.” When the son’s friend died of butane inhaling, the participant expressed that he felt convicted about his promise to God:

...so that really made me take God seriously again I suppose. You know, and it still took me 5 more years of going to church to give up marijuana, you know, it was a very much a... I mean I didn’t smoke Sunday morning so I never went to church stoned, but I would, I would make haste to get home you know... (3/4/1).

### 6.5.2 INVITATION

Some participants began their return to a faith community because a friend asked them if they would like to come to church. Participant 6, as was mentioned above, was in a state of crisis at the time, but it was the invitation of a friend that opened the door for her return to church. She recalled her friend’s invitation: “‘You know you can just come back to church anytime you want eh? You know, come along with us one time,’ and I was like, OK. You know, so I did...” (6/3/5). Another participant spoke of driving past a church one day with a friend who suggested dropping in because he had gone there years before. They did, and this and subsequent visits marked the beginning of a re-examination of her beliefs and a new commitment to a faith community.

## 6.6 THINKING SPACE – RECONNECTION

Many participants who had spent time living outside the lines, explained that when they began to reconnect with their beliefs and with a faith community there was another phase of the thinking space, where earlier beliefs and experiences of God were confronted and evaluated, and where the participants processed through what their faith might now encompass. All these participants had been, in an earlier phase of life, very committed in their beliefs and lifestyles, so this thinking space was an opportunity for a re-evaluation of beliefs and expectations of the faith community. As one participant put it, “So we started, me and Jesus started to unpick and unpack and walk through life, where it was and where it had been, and how it got to where it was...” (15/8/8).

In this thinking space, participants fell into one of two groups. Some spoke of coming back to their faith with quite different expectations and experiences to their earlier lives, while others reflected on their re-emerging faith in ways that were very similar to what

they had described as their first faith experience. Those who came back to their faith with fresh perspectives expressed that they had actively sought to re-examine their faith to find out what it meant for them, rather than relying on what they had known before. These participants had experienced some very difficult times while outside the lines, and these difficulties had prompted the participants to question previous beliefs. In doing so, they moved to a new appreciation of the place of faith and the faith community in their lives:

Its profoundly different, I'm profoundly different, every day I'm experiencing a greater peace in myself, which transpires to a greater love of people, a genuine love, not a love based on works or good deeds...(15/13/9).

Another participant expressed that when she came to return to her faith she did so wanting to search out and understand what she believed, rather than relying on messages received when she was a young person living at home in a Christian family. She attended a church where, in addition to the Sunday services she could attend additional theology classes, which helped her to come to her own understanding of many subjects. In contrast to her early experience of faith, her conclusion following this time in the thinking space was, "So probably, so for me him dying on the cross means freedom..." (6/7/1).

The second group of participants seemed to manage their return to faith in a way that replicated their experiences and beliefs before they moved away. These participants questioned less and expressed fewer changes in the ways they perceived God and the expectations on them as they returned to a faith community. These unquestioning attitudes were reflected in comments such as, "but I don't question his ways so much" (14/3/3), and "I just know it comes from the Bible and I just believe it...yeah" (13/6/3). Another participant, using language typical of faith between the lines described what coming back to her faith was like:

Well, and a dying because I find as I walk with Christ there's a dying to self and when I mean a dying to self, not that I'm losing part of myself but maybe a dying to the old nature... (9/5/7).

Another participant, in describing his journey of faith, which included a number of years outside the lines, spoke of a perspective of God that remained unchanged over the course of his life. It appeared that his fundamental understanding of the character of

God had not changed, despite the passage of time, multiple harrowing experiences, and a dedication to personally studying the Bible:

Yes! The idea that there's two sides to God right, there's God's love and his righteousness, or justice and unfortunately God has both sides you know, unfortunately for us, because he is perfect, he is pure... whereas with us we're fickle, you know, finite beings ... he is totally pure and... good, but with that good comes the idea of righteousness, and if we are unrighteous we cannot come into God's presence... (3/6/3).

## **6.7 STRATEGIES**

As has been suggested in the previous section, there was one central strategy for participants who left the thinking space having made a decision to reconnect with their beliefs and with a faith community. However, this strategy involved a decision about what their renewed faith and involvement would be like, whether they would attend the same sort of church as they had previously, subscribe to the same beliefs between the lines, or find new expressions for their faith. The decisions made here by participants were in direct correspondence with their processing in the thinking space. Some participants sought out faith communities that would allow them to change their thinking and explore new approaches to God and faith; while others returned to very similar churches to those they had previously participated in. For these participants, denomination did not appear to be a particularly important factor, rather, the evangelical nature of the church, adherence to “biblical truth” and acceptance of beliefs between the lines were of prime importance in the choice of a church to belong to.

## **6.8 CONCLUSION**

In this chapter I have presented and explained the category “Patterns in the thinking space,” which explains the journeys of participants who spent time outside the lines. Central to this discussion was consideration of what occurs in the thinking space, where participants processed their beliefs about God and their understanding of how he works in their lives and in the world. I have presented the various conditions that emerged from participants’ descriptions of what caused them to disconnect from faith and similarly what caused them to reconnect. We also considered the strategies that



participants used in responding to their needs to change circumstances following time in the thinking space.

It might be tempting to describe the Christian life as life between the lines. However, viewed from the perspective of participants' stories, which at times wove in and out of relationship with God, sometimes tightly connected to a community of faith and sometimes not, experiencing God both inside and outside the lines, perhaps the Christian life can be understood in a more expansive way. Participants' stories are reminiscent of the people of Israel: covenanted with God, at times faithful and blessed, and at times in exile, waiting for redemption, longing for a way home. Certainly not a perfect people, but covenanted with a perfect God. Perhaps the Christian life is a reflection of this journey of the ancient Israelites: relationship with God is defined primarily by the faithfulness of the covenant-making God. The Israelites did not cease to be Israelites, or the people of God, during their many wilderness experiences or times under foreign rule. Similarly, I propose that a Christian life is in fact lived across the lines of usual evangelical experience. Life runs its course and people experience the whole gamut of life's challenges, but God does not change. God is present both inside and outside the lines: the boundaries are of our making and may define human experience but never constrain God's presence.



## Chapter 7

### THEOLOGICAL DISCUSSION

#### 7.1 INTRODUCTION

I began this thesis by introducing the topic and explaining the concern I have held about the possible negative effects of some beliefs about the atonement on the experience of life of evangelical Christians. This concern was tentative, because it was unclear whether a particular set of theological tenets would have practical outcomes in peoples' lives. On the one hand, some theologians have proposed that specific theological beliefs about the atonement will affect the lives of those who hold those beliefs.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, others, mainly from the fields of psychology and psychotherapy have proposed that because there are multiple levels of experience, including both explicit and implicit awareness, a person's experience of life will reflect the complexity of multiple overlapping areas of thought, feelings and experiences.<sup>2</sup> As a result, though there are certainly some discernable correlations between various images of God and certain measures of wellbeing, it was unclear whether a specific area of theological belief would function in this way.<sup>3</sup> I expressed my personal concern regarding the commonly held theory of penal substitution: in this theory, God is often viewed as angry and vindictive, needing to punish in order to be satisfied. The central concern of this thesis was established: whether such a view of God could have harmful effects in the lives of those choosing to worship a God represented by this type of theory. In Chapter 2 we considered some of the Biblical material behind the various theories of atonement and discussed some of the central theories, including Satisfaction theory, which includes, but is not limited to penal substitution. Also discussed were Christus Victor and Moral

---

<sup>1</sup> See for example Green and Baker, who suggest, "...the metaphors concerning the character of God that are accorded privilege in atonement theology lead easily and naturally to the incarnation of those characteristics in human relationship – that is, among those whose vocation is to reflect the divine image." Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 115.

<sup>2</sup> Hall suggests, for example, that "implicit experiences form the *foundation* of the emotional appraisal of meaning in any aspect of spiritual functioning including one's relationship with God, rather than explicit, symbolic, knowledge of God or theology." Hall, "Christian Spirituality and Mental Health," 75.

<sup>3</sup> For research concerning image of God and wellbeing, see: Benson and Spilka, "God Image as a Function of Self-Esteem and Locus of Control."; Brokaw and Edwards, "The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations."; Lawrence, "Measuring the Image of God: The God Inventory and the God Image Scales."; Ana Wong-McDonald and Richard L. Gorsuch, "A Multivariate Theory of God Concept, Religious Motivation, Locus of Control, Coping, and Spiritual Well-Being," *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32, no. 4 (2004).

Influence theory. I chose to raise some matters of particular concern that arise when addressing approaches to the atonement, namely the importance of being aware of the ways we use language and the significance of context when approaching the Biblical accounts.

Because of the lack of existing literature addressing the core question, I turned in Chapter 3 to explain the chosen methodology for the thesis: that of Grounded Theory. Grounded Theory is an excellent choice for qualitative research where there is little or no extant theory, as it allows a theory to be developed that is grounded in the data gathered.<sup>4</sup> For this research, I interviewed nineteen participants from evangelical churches, asking them about their beliefs about the atonement and also about their experience of life. As is expected to be the case with Grounded Theory, the direction of the research moved as I analysed the data concurrently with the conduct of further interviews.<sup>5</sup> It became apparent, first, that most participants had somewhat sketchy understanding of the atonement and second, that there appeared to be a lack of connection between what participants did express about the atonement and the ways they described the events of their lives. What was apparent, however, was that in response to questions about the atonement, participants spoke about their wider understanding of God, the ways they understood God to have been present in their lives, the expectations they had of God and the expectations they believed God had of them.<sup>6</sup> From this data I constructed the substantive theory “A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines.” This theory explains the process by which these evangelical Christians came to their faith and made a decision to become a Christian by accepting Christ as personal saviour. It goes on to explain the beliefs commonly held about God by evangelical Christians and the expectations that result concerning the experience they have of living between the lines of faith. The ‘lines’ are the boundaries set by evangelical expectations around acceptable beliefs and experiences in life. Those same lines are thought to define the limits of those who are saved. Those who live between the

---

<sup>4</sup> See Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 16.

<sup>5</sup> The process referred to in Grounded Theory as Constant Comparative Analysis. For a summary of features of Constant Comparative Analysis see Antony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007), 607.

<sup>6</sup> This is not at all surprising. As J. Denny Weaver commented regarding the atonement debate in *Atonement and Violence*: “This debate concerns not only atonement theology. It goes to the heart of the discussion about the nature of Christian faith and practice.” J. Denny Weaver, “Response to Hans Boersma,” in *Atonement and Violence : A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 73.

lines are understood to be saved and therefore “in”, whereas those outside the lines are “out.” This understanding produces an attendant fear and distrust of the state of being “out.” What was surprising about the findings was that many participants reported significant periods of life outside the lines. While these were negative experiences for some participants, God was also experienced as being present in their lives outside the lines, in a space where God was not generally expected to be present. Chapters 4 – 6 explored the findings from the research, detailing the theory and explaining the various stages and processes of living across the lines.

When discussing the atonement, participants expressed a range of ideas about God. During analysis these ideas were conceptualised, and categorised leading to an explanatory substantive theory, as discussed in Chapter 4. In this chapter I will be discussing these concepts, as presented by participants, in light of the biblical material and the atonement theories discussed in Chapter 2. In this discussion, I wish to honor the courage that each participant showed: firstly for presenting for an interview in response to an advertisement and second, more importantly, for their brave, unique and faith-filled journeys through all that life had thrown at them. Consequently, it is not my intention to be critical of the notions presented by individual participants, however, the theologies presented collectively do present some questions and in turn these questions will lead to consideration of the role and effectiveness of the local church in teaching theological foundations of the faith. A later section in this chapter will turn to consider the impact of recent scholarship concerning the atonement on beliefs in the local church and will discuss where this ongoing academic debate might helpfully lead.

## **7.2 SOURCES OF PARTICIPANTS’ THEOLOGIES**

Almost all the participants in this research grew up in church-going families, or, in the case of two participants, attended a church with friends, from a young age. The only participant who had not attended a church regularly prior to the early teenage years came to faith as a nineteen year old. Accordingly, most participants had considerable input from their families into the formation of their ideas about God. It was notable in the findings that a number of participants had particularly strong input from their parents in laying foundations of the faith in them as very young children. One participant recalled learning large tracts of the Bible off-by-heart from the age of three

or four – including, according to her account, Isaiah 53, Hebrews 11 and the book of James. This participant recalled her father’s encouragement to her as a four year old that she should make a decision to be a Christian: “... my Dad’s rather blunt about the connection between sin and hell” (5/1/6). Even for those participants with less directive parents, the family provided an early and very strong influence in the formation of their beliefs about God, and for many participants those ties continued to be strong, with the influence continuing well into adulthood. One participant, who was eleven when his father became a Christian and subsequently an Anglican priest, recalled that his father’s sermons had been one of the biggest influences on his beliefs. “I think my Dad’s preaching... I mean he wouldn’t go weighty into theological depth, my Dad was... so his background was as a naval sailor, he wasn’t educated, I think Dad has... a great gift at putting things into simple terms” (10/10/1). Interestingly, as further indication of the strength of family ties in learning about God, after this participant attended a lecture on the atonement by New Testament scholar Chris Marshall, he reflected that he didn’t agree with Marshall’s approach to the atonement, in large part because Marshall had diverged from his father’s understanding of the cross.

It would be hard to overstate the significance of the impact of early family life on young children in terms of the development of an understanding of God.<sup>7</sup> However, much of the content of the learning in the early years is not cognitive, factual learning: instead, children learn about God by observing their parents and siblings at worship, in relationship, in the rituals and patterns of family living. Much of this material is subsymbolic,<sup>8</sup> and subsequently not readily available for discussion. A number of participants made allusion to some aspect of their childhood in ways that suggested early development of implicit relational meanings: for example the participant who commented, “I don’t think I’ve ever, I guess there’s been something in me, in my core that’s, that’s been like this forever” (11/5/5). This participant expressed that he had always felt uncomfortable with militaristic images in the church, and though he could not identify the source of this discomfort, it is more than likely that there was some early experience of learning in his family that sowed the seeds for this life-long feeling. One of the limitations of this research has been that participants presented verbal explanations

---

<sup>7</sup> There is a rich body of literature on this subject, see for example the seminal work of Ana-Maria Rizutto: Rizutto, *The Birth of the Living God*.

<sup>8</sup> See Hall, “Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part II.” Hall outlines his theory of implicit relational meaning, utilizing Bucci’s subsymbolic emotional processing.

of their understanding of God and the work of Jesus on the cross, but these presentations did little to unearth the subsymbolic or non-verbal symbolic origins of their adult reflections. However, it is possible that the narrative event of interviewing did in some ways facilitate integration of the verbal and explicit and implicit awareness of participants, as suggested by Hall.<sup>9</sup> This is perhaps evidenced by the email from a participant after interview, commenting, “It’s interesting, this conversation sent me on a whole re-evaluation of what I believe / experience about Jesus. Very cool.”<sup>10</sup>

Following these earliest family experiences, participants were then exposed to the learning environment of a church. Participants belonged to a range of denominations, but the predominant feature was that most had spent time in a number of different churches rather than remaining loyal to one specific denomination. It appeared that the outward nature of the church was more important to participants than the denomination, and in particular, whether the church was perceived as being “Bible believing” or “alive.” This equates well with the understanding of evangelicalism as being transdenominational, as was discussed in Chapter 1. A number of participants expressed this preference even more clearly by choosing to refer to themselves as “Christian” rather than any particular denomination. Interestingly, when asked what they had learned about the atonement in the church setting, few participants had much to say. Sermons were rarely mentioned as a source of understanding the cross, and on the one occasion when a participant did recall a sermon about the cross, it was not the words that were spoken, but rather, the physical construction of a cross as a part of the sermon, that remained in memory. Participation in communion services was a contributing factor for a few participants, with excerpts of liturgies being remembered in part. More significant as a source of theological ideas about the atonement were the hymns and songs that participants could recall. This is not at all surprising given the way that memory is often aided by use of music and also because of the emotive nature of music that adds layers of meaning to the formation of memories. However, even given these observations, hymns mentioned by participants were not particularly numerous and few participants could remember many of the words of those hymns. Hymns mentioned included “Man of sorrows, wondrous name,” “The old rugged cross, so

---

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Personal communication with Participant 18, 17 Jan 2017.

despised by the world,” “When peace like a river,” “Great is thy faithfulness” and “Shall Jesus bear the cross alone?” In addition, two contemporary songs received a mention, namely, “Like a rose trampled on the ground ... you took the fall and thought of me above all...” and “Lead me to the cross where your love poured out.” It may be that there is an affective component to these hymns and songs that is significant for participants, but the level of connection with the actual words suggests that they have not held a particularly cognitive, educative role concerning the atonement.

Participants also spoke about the importance of the Bible to their faith, in keeping with the evangelical tenet of the centrality of the Bible.<sup>11</sup> One of the interview questions asked whether participants recalled any particular passages from the Bible that stood out for them concerning their understanding of the atonement or the meaning of Jesus’ death on the cross. In light of the stated importance of the Bible, the responses to this question were particularly interesting. Of nineteen participants, ten did not offer any biblical material when given the opportunity. Some of these did of course reference some other source, for example a hymn, song or book. Of the remaining participants, seven either referenced or roughly quoted a text or two, including three references to Isaiah 53: “that prophetic passage about Jesus...” John 3:16: “For God so loved the world...” was referenced once and quoted twice. Other quotes were “The wages of sin is death” and “The truth will set you free,” and Ps 42:3 was referenced once. In contrast to this paucity of recall, one participant was able to reference and accurately quote the following passages: John 3:16; John 1:10; John 1:12; Rom 3:23; Rom 6:23 and Eph 2:8-9. One further participant, who said, “So I’m a believer in terms of what I read in the Bible...” (10/1/2) referred to the Bible as the source of the following beliefs but did not reference where the ideas came from: God cannot look on sin; Christ was a sacrifice; God poured out his wrath on his son; Christ was the lamb who was slain; Jesus was cursed because he hung on a tree.

While it is no doubt a daunting task to be asked to recall particular passages in an interview setting, the lack of breadth of awareness of the Scriptures among a group that has stated a high view of the authority of the Bible, particularly with regard to such a

---

<sup>11</sup> For a contemporary statement of evangelical distinctives, including the claim that evangelicals have “a high regard for and obedience to the Bible as the ultimate authority,” see National Association of Evangelicals, “What is an Evangelical?” <<https://www.nae.net/what-is-an-evangelical/>> (accessed 4 April 2017).



central aspect of evangelical belief, raises some interesting questions about the role of the local church, questions that we must return to later in this chapter. It seemed that participants had gained their understanding of the atonement, and more generally of God, from a wide array of sources: as one participant put it, her beliefs had come from:

...the church... from other people, from the Bible... yeah I mean I think its just that shared language and the shared story that gets passed along... and some of it from journeying one-on-one with a personal relationship with God but I think in terms of understanding it that's probably something we do more socially, in the churches, and friendship groups and connections and that sort of thing...(8/6/2).

### **7.3 SCOPE OF PARTICIPANT THEOLOGIES**

Participants presented a range of ideas about God and a subsequent series of ideas about the way that God deals with the world and people, particularly those who confess to being Christian. Through data analysis, these ideas were presented as key concepts that were explained in detail in Chapter 5. In summary, the concepts about God were that God is relational, restorative, exclusive/unattainable, punitive and conditional. Following on from these concepts, participants also presented a range of thoughts about the way that God functions with respect to humanity, and these ideas were presented as the concepts: 'The problem – the gulf between God and humanity'; 'A personal problem'; 'An exclusive solution' and 'The cost of following.'

When speaking about their understanding of Jesus' death on the cross, most participants reflected the sorts of ideas presented above. There were a few participants who expressed different ideas or variations on these concepts, but these were the predominant concepts that led to the development of the category "Living between the lines." Very few participants were able to articulate much of the multiplicity of New Testament metaphors regarding Jesus' death, though of course some did use terms such as "redeemed," "ransomed," "sacrifice" or "adopted." Only two participants named any of the theories of the atonement that have been prominent in church history, and for one, this was because he realized prior to the interview that he didn't know anything about the atonement, so he, "...asked Google what the death of Christ meant..."

(11/2/1).<sup>12</sup> As has been discussed briefly above, most participants were limited in their ability to attribute their understanding of the cross to passages from the Bible, despite many reporting the importance of the Bible to them. It seemed that most participants had somehow collected their ideas about Jesus' death on the cross from their years of experiences in families and churches, and that most of these ideas had been absorbed and assimilated into the participants' views of God and the world, seemingly without much critical reflection. During interviews it was not uncommon for a participant to say something like, "I haven't really thought about that," or "That's a good question, I'll have to think that through."

### 7.3.1 PENAL SUBSTITUTION

Notwithstanding these concerns, participants did present a series of ideas about the atonement, and it is notable that these ideas correlate most clearly with the themes of penal substitutionary theory, where a transaction takes place and where God is portrayed as punitive and retributive. This correlation is represented in Table 1, where participants' statements are compared with key elements of penal substitution as presented in Grudem's *Systematic Theology*, a standard evangelical account of the atonement. In the table, Grudem's main headings relating to the atonement are laid out in the left column and correlated statements from participants are given on the right. Grudem says of his presentation that, "This has been the orthodox understanding of the atonement held by evangelical theologians..."<sup>13</sup>

Table 5: Comparison of participant quotes with Grudem's theology

Grudem, <i>Systematic Theology</i> , pp. 568-580 <sup>14</sup>	Participant Quotes
<b>A. The Cause of the Atonement</b> "The love of God as a cause of the atonement is seen in the most familiar passage in the Bible: 'For God so loved the world...'...But the justice of God also required that God find a way that the	"The idea that there's two sides to God right, there's God's love and his righteousness, or justice and unfortunately God has both sides you know, unfortunately for us, because he is perfect, he is pure, there's no shadow of change

<sup>12</sup> According to this participant, his search using Google resulted in an overwhelming dominance of "hits" related to penal substitution. He said that the first 20 results at least were related to penal substitution, leading him to carry out further research to find out if any other models existed.

<sup>13</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 579.

<sup>14</sup> The headings on the left side of the table and expanding quotes are taken from *ibid.*, 568-80.

<p>penalty due to us for our sins would be paid...”</p>	<p>with him, whereas with us we’re fickle, you know, finite beings ...but if you take the principle that there is no ...that there is no change to its, to its ultimate, then God is... holy, you know... he is totally pure and... good, but with that good comes the idea of righteousness, and if we are unrighteous we cannot come into God’s presence...” (3/6/3).</p> <p>“Christ has gone before us in a way to... be for us the price that needed to be paid, so... we can proceed with confidence ourselves ... the perfect offering for our sin...” (1/2/1).</p> <p>“God’s holiness required that there was a punishment for that sin, so, yeah, you could say that’s, that it was a cost wasn’t it?” (2/4/11).</p>
<p><b>B. The Necessity of the Atonement</b>  “Only the blood of Christ, that is, his death, would be able really to take away sins (Heb. 9:25-26). There was no other way for God to save us than for Christ to die in our place.”</p>	<p>“Jesus dying for me is the only way, ah that I’m going to be approved...and have been approved by God...” (10/1/2).</p> <p>“I think death... there did need to be bloodshed because that was... without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness...” (10/6/5)</p> <p>“...its necessary because without his death there’d be no forgiveness of sin, or, or atonement or relationship or ... eternal life...” (13/11/2).</p>
<p><b>C. The Nature of the Atonement</b>  <b>1. Christ’s Obedience for us</b>  “Christ had to live a life of perfect obedience to God in order to earn righteousness for us.”</p>	<p>“...so what Jesus has done is because he was without sin, the only perfect person, fully man, he has...he took that on for us and his death on the cross was sufficient to provide that forgiveness for all of us...” (4/2/1).</p> <p>“So because Christ took our sin on himself on the cross, God looks at me now as... I exchanged my sin for Christ’s righteousness so I’m able to stand before God, clothed in Christ in his righteousness rather than myself, so I’m able to be holy and stand before him...” (4/3/10).</p>

	<p>“...because he was the only one who lived, you know, a life without sin, and so he needed to represent humanity and die on the cross, because the only, the only sacrifice that would’ve been acceptable was for Jesus to die on the cross, someone who was righteous to die on the cross and take on the sin of the world...” (7/4/7).</p> <p>“I think... his righteousness is given to me through that, but I think it was Jesus’ perfect life, ah made him, qualified him to be an acceptable and a supreme sacrifice...” (10/4/2).</p>
<p><b>2. Christ’s Sufferings for Us</b>  <i>a. Suffering for His Whole Life</i>          “In a broad sense the penalty Christ bore in paying for our sins was suffering in both his body and his soul throughout his life.”</p>	
<p><i>b. The Pain of the Cross</i>          i. Physical Pain and Death          “We do not need to hold that Jesus suffered more physical pain than any human being has suffered, for the Bible nowhere makes such a claim. But we still must not forget that death by crucifixion was one of the most horrible forms of execution ever devised by man.”</p>	<p>“...and then he’s like killed in one of the possible most gruesome and demeaning and painful and slow ways that they could think of... so, yes it’s a sacrifice...” (6/9/7).</p>
<p>ii. The Pain of Bearing Sin          “Jesus took on himself all the sins of those who would someday be saved. Taking on himself all the evil against which his soul rebelled created deep revulsion in the center of his being. All that he hated most deeply was poured out fully upon him.”</p>	
<p>iii. Abandonment          “As Jesus bore our sins on the cross, he was abandoned by his heavenly Father, who is ‘of purer eyes than to behold evil’ (Hab. 1:13). He faced the weight of the guilt of millions of sins alone.”</p>	<p>“...he actually had to be separated from God because he was carrying the sin of the world and that would’ve been a very lonely thing to go through, I mean physically it would’ve been painful, terrible, but also being incredibly lonely when the people who are meant to be your friends abandon you and even God abandoning you, that’s worse....that’s sacrifice...” (7/6/1)</p>

	<p>“...he wasn’t afraid of crucifixion, he was afraid of what he was going to face from God... I mean I don’t know the depth of the mystery, but he was separated from God I believe for a... I don’t know how long or I don’t know how that works but I believe that that punishment includes...he’d never been separated from God in his life...” (10/8/3).</p>
<p>iv. Bearing the wrath of God          “As Jesus bore the guilt of our sins alone, God the Father, the mighty Creator, the Lord of the universe, poured out on Jesus the fury of his wrath: Jesus became the object of the intense hatred of sin and vengeance against sin which God had patiently stored up since the beginning of the world.”</p>	<p>“I believe that God punished Jesus for that... the wrath that should’ve been directed at me, did get directed at Christ, and so that effectively paid the penalty...” (10/4/2)</p>
<p><i>c. Further Understanding of the Death of Christ</i>          i. The Penalty was Inflicted by God the Father          “...the penalty was inflicted by God the Father as he represented the interests of the Trinity in redemption.”</p>	<p>“...if Jesus therefore took the place, or my place on the cross then the only punishment must have been Jesus who took it and God who delivered it because he’s the holy God who deals with sin and does punish it...and that’s what I see in the Bible, I see a holy God who cannot let sin go unpunished, and if Christ was the sacrifice... and if he took those sins on himself then I can’t see any way around the logic that dictates that God must have therefore poured out his wrath on his only son...” (10/5/3).</p>
<p>ii. Not Eternal Suffering but Complete Payment          “Jesus was able to bear all the wrath of God against sin and bear it to the end...When Jesus knew that he had paid the full penalty for our sin, he said, ‘<i>It is finished</i>’ (John 19:30).”</p>	<p>“I saw him in a...what would you say a vision? It wasn’t anything that dramatic, but him, I knew it was him ‘cos he was showing me his hands and his feet and they had the scars and he was going, ‘I’m Ok 15, I’m alright now,’ you know, ta-ta guess what, I’m off it, you know I’m off the cross, I’m off it, I am off the cross, OK? Did that, I’m off it now...” (15/11/1).</p>
<p>iii. The Meaning of the Blood of Christ          “The blood of Christ is the clear outward evidence that his life blood was poured out when he died a sacrificial death to pay for</p>	<p>“...having communion in a church service is such a critical point, and focusing on the blood of Christ and all of those things, and each week we’d be kind of taken to those things, as the, you know, the crucial?”</p>

our redemption – the ‘blood of Christ’ means his death in its saving aspects.”	(2/2/3).
<p>iv. Christ’s Death as “Penal Substitution”</p> <p>“Christ’s death was ‘penal’ in that he bore a penalty when he died. His death was also a ‘substitution’ in that he was a substitute for us when he died.”</p>	<p>“...so the cross is his way of paying the price himself in real physical terms through Jesus’ death and....paying the price that we owe, so that he can have a relationship with us again.” (5/3/6).</p> <p>“...so I think that if you’re constantly fearful and feeling guilty, the idea of Jesus saving, like coming to earth to save you, to pay for your sin (yeah) is a ... a really enticing concept...” (17/6-7)</p>
<p>d. <i>New Testament Terms Describing Different Aspects of the Atonement</i></p> <p>i. We deserve to die as the penalty for sin</p>	<p>“Jesus’ death on the cross means that I am made acceptable to God, that he has taken on my sin, and my punishment, that I was deserving of, he’s taken that on himself and he’s removed that, so I no longer live under guilt... and condemnation...” (4/1/3).</p>
<p>ii. We deserve to bear God’s wrath against sin</p>	<p>“Do we deserve it? I think we do still, I think you could say we still deserve it... but God’s provided a way for us to... avoid that punishment.” (2/5/4).</p>
<p>iii. We are separated from God by our sins</p>	<p>“... you know, it showed the Gospel story and it had like the two sides of... with the big chasm in the middle and the cross bridged the gap between God on one side...” (2/3/7).</p> <p>“Adam sinned, and inherent in all humans is this separation from God... but the fact that there is this thing of original sin or something you know... (3/5/7).</p> <p>“...so we’ve all fallen short of God’s standard... and God’s holiness demands that there’s justice, there’s punishment for that, which means that we experience separation from him....” (4/2/1).</p> <p>“...in the spiritual sense we can’t be in God’s presence, broken as we are because we deserve judgment...” (5/3/6).</p> <p>“God is perfect and he... oh I hate to say</p>

	<p>the word can't, but I'm going to...so he can't be in relationship with sin, so our sin has destroyed that, his holiness is that he's perfect, he's unique, he's one of a kind, um and he's unreachable for us as humans you know, apart from through Christ..." (4/3/8).</p> <p>"Jesus had to die on the cross because otherwise we can't have a relationship with God..." (16/5/7).</p>
iv We are in bondage to sin and to the kingdom of Satan	<p>"...putting it bluntly I believe the world is more somewhat under control by the devil than it is under God..." (19/8/1).</p>

As can be seen in the table, participants consistently spoke about the main aspects of penal substitution, as presented by Grudem. In places, participants used virtually the same language as Grudem to describe an aspect of the atonement, whereas in other situations the language used varied and yet implied similar meaning. It is notable of course that two of Grudem's dimensions were not spoken about by participants, whereas several of his dimensions were very strongly supported. These differences highlight the focus of the beliefs held by participants. Participants' accounts tended to emphasise the personal nature of the atonement: that they had been granted a personal relationship with God because of Jesus' sacrifice. A summary of the participants' views might say something like: "God is holy and I am so sinful I can't approach him. I really deserved punishment for this sin, but Jesus stepped into my place, took my sin on himself and died in my place so that now I can have a relationship with God the Father. Now God counts me as righteous whereas before I was unworthy and unrighteous." Such an account equates easily with the presentation of penal substitutionary accounts of the work of God through the cross. However, penal substitution is clearly not the only theory of the atonement, and there are challenges to this theory that deserve attention, particularly considering its prevalence in the language of participants. As Fiddes points out, "...it is quite another step of thought altogether to propose a doctrine of salvation by legal transfer, where God agrees to impute Christ's righteousness to us in exchange for our guilt and penalty being imposed upon him. Such a conclusion is not

drawn by St Paul or by other New Testament writers.”<sup>15</sup> However, before we turn to consider some concerns about penal substitutionary thought, I will first outline some alternative accounts offered by participants. As has been stated, substitutionary thinking was the predominant presentation, but four participants had different approaches to their understanding of the cross. Although these participants did not use a theoretical name for their accounts, I have characterized the first three by the historical theory that most closely fits, with a fourth as another alternative.

### 7.3.2 MORAL INFLUENCE

As noted earlier, one participant spoke during interview of a deeply felt discomfort around militaristic themes in church, including hymns like “Onward Christian Soldiers.” Despite a lifetime of Christian involvement, in approaching the interview this participant realized that he did not know anything about the atonement and did not know what he thought about Jesus’ death on the cross. Consequently, he did some research on Google, discovered that the common presentation of Penal Substitution in Google search results did not sit comfortably with him, and so continued his search until he found Derek Flood’s, *Healing the Gospel*.<sup>16</sup> At the time of interview he was still reading the book, but said he resonated strongly with Flood’s account. Independent of this reading however, the participant’s perspective of God was that “God is love, full stop” (11/2/1). Concerning Jesus, he said, “And the way, the way he loved and the example he gave...the way he lived his life when he was alive... Because he is just the perfect model for me and for humanity, he would be that whether he was crucified or not” (11/15/3-5).

### 7.3.3 CHRISTUS VICTOR

One participant held a view that combined ideas of the sacrifice of Jesus that had allowed him to be released from the condemning power of the law into a personal relationship with God. Central to these ideas however was a Christus Victor theme of Jesus gaining the victory over the powers: “I mean, on the cross, because he died and descended into hell and won the thing over life and death... therefore, you know there

---

<sup>15</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 89.

<sup>16</sup> Flood, *Healing the Gospel*.



was victory and therefore there is the chance for life, well the opportunity to take hold of life now..." (14/4/3).

#### 7.3.4 RECAPITULATION

One participant told a particularly poignant story of her life as a young girl suffering sexual abuse at the hands of a Christian family friend. Tragically, this abuse led to a lifetime of difficult relationships and an ongoing battle with God as she sought to make sense of what she understood of Jesus' death for her in light of her suffering. As she said, "Well, when you're little enough to be aware of him on his cross, taking his sin on the... and you're being abused and violated by a man who's protesting exactly the same thing in the same context ... How is Jesus taking away sin while it is literally being ...um, what's the word, enacted against me...?" (15/11/3). Through many years of finding healing for herself, piecing her life and faith together in a way that made sense for her, this participant came to some profound insights about God's presence in the death of Jesus on the cross:

...in that time...when he was taken off the cross he died, he was a dead human being and that... he was God incarnate... he, God died, God died for a time...and the amount of time doesn't matter I think its so infinitesimal that... it could take whatever, that's quantum physics...but he truly truly died. God, God truly died...God, goodness died, every... love died, hope died, everything died, it died because it had to be reset, its like a reset button, the wages of sin are death... so this idea of resurrection is a brand new beginning of life, the first seed of true life...that's amazing isn't it? The most pure life, there's no...pollution, and it's in all those who believe as it's played out... (15/15/1).

#### 7.3.5 "SAFE IN THE CROSS"

Another participant had a similarly sad story, but this time of betrayal and marriage breakdown. As a child in a strictly religious family, the participant had learned that anger was wrong, so when she was confronted with the magnitude of her own anger and hurt, she struggled to cope with these feelings. During this time, one startling realisation for her was about forgiveness: "...for me that was my journey toward forgiveness was to actually realize... I couldn't just let it go, there was no way to let something that big go, but to realize that justice had been done for, and that when Jesus died on the cross for my sins he died on the cross for their sins too..." (8/2/5). The cross became a place

where she came to understand that God was present with her in the midst of all the difficulty of her situation:

That's where I got to the point where I was just...had to place myself at the foot of the cross, you know I couldn't deal with the hurt and the pain and the anger that I was feeling but I could come to Jesus and know that he had it all sorted out and I definitely remember having that image in my mind of being at the foot of the cross and just finding the safety there and when it was all getting too much... coming back there in an emotional and metaphorical sense to the foot of the cross, its just that, God knows what he's doing and I'm here where its safe, and I don't necessarily understand all of the theology behind it but... (8/8/4).

Having considered the range of participants' theologies, we turn back now to reconsider some of the central aspects of penal substitutionary thought in light of some key biblical and theological ideas. This discussion will focus on the categories developed to explain participants' theological accounts, namely "The problem – the gulf between God and humanity," "A personal problem," "An exclusive solution" and "The cost of following."

## **7.4 CONSIDERATION OF "THEOLOGIES OF THE LINES"**

In approaching this discussion of the theologies presented by participants, it should be noted that while there is definitely overlap with the usual presentation of the theory, participants' stories represent the beliefs of people in local churches rather than the more developed theologies of scholars. As has been noted earlier, many factors have influenced the development of these ideas in the minds of participants, with only a few participants having received formal theological education. David Tombs has argued that understandings of the atonement by people in the local church often involves greater acceptance of violence, in particular, divine violence, than scholarly depictions tend to, for three reasons: first, there tends to be little discussion of original theological depictions of the models of atonement, hence matters of historical and cultural context tend to be lost. Second, models tend to be uncritically merged together, with metaphors being mixed in a way that tends to obscure the intended meanings of the original images, and third, as I have suggested earlier, most congregations tend not to study theology, instead experiencing it in their sung worship or Eucharist.<sup>17</sup> Tombs' primary

---

<sup>17</sup> David Tombs, "Acknowledging Jesus as Victim of Sexual Abuse," Public Lecture at The University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand, 20 July 2016, <[https://mediastore.auckland.ac.nz/uploaded/project/CMS\\_ARTS/public/072016/8CC450E5BC7347AD90B4ED7FE51D607C.preview](https://mediastore.auckland.ac.nz/uploaded/project/CMS_ARTS/public/072016/8CC450E5BC7347AD90B4ED7FE51D607C.preview)> (accessed 2 March 2017).

concern is that the unexamined atonement beliefs in the local church can, through uncritical acceptance of violent models of the atonement, lead to a greater acceptance of abuse in human relationships, which impacts primarily on women and children. This concern with the violence inherent in some atonement theories is an issue that I will return to shortly. For now, we turn to the presentation of ideas about the atonement, based on the concepts of God presented by participants.

#### 7.4.1 THE PROBLEM – THE GULF BETWEEN GOD AND HUMANITY

In this fundamental aspect of the beliefs of participants, God is spoken of as being “holy” and “righteous,” in contrast to the “sinful,” “fallen,” “guilty” state of humanity. The gulf that therefore exists between God and humanity is impassable because God “can’t look on sin,” and so humanity cannot approach God. God, likewise, is unable to approach humanity. Humanity is therefore lost in its sinful state, with no way out of this situation. There are two main issues here that we will address in turn, first, the righteousness of God, and second, the idea that God “can’t look on sin.”

##### 7.4.1.1 The Righteousness of God

Participants were clear that God is righteous, or, as some put it, holy. In fact, the two terms were commonly used either concurrently or interchangeably. These assertions were not usually backed up by reference to a Bible verse or theological reasoning, but rather presented as statements of fact. By use of such terms, participants were ascribing to God qualities of perfection in contrast to the imperfection experienced in the world. As one participant put it:

...when I think of God’s righteousness I just think of, he is holy, I would stand in awe of him because he’s good, he’s powerful and he’s right...in that he feels so indescribable for me ...when I think of God’s righteousness I immediately want to bow down before him because... just that place of authority and awe... acknowledging his authority and the fact that he’s in the right... (7/2/1).

Evangelical theology takes a similar approach to the subject, accrediting righteousness primarily as an ethical attribute. The relevant entry in the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology is titled, “Ethically, God is Holy, Righteous and Loving” and states:

God is morally spotless in character and action, upright, pure, and untainted with evil desires, motives, thought, words or acts. God is *holy*, and as such is the source and standard of what is right... God's justice or righteousness is revealed in his moral law expressing his moral nature and in his judgment, granting to all, in matters of merit, exactly what they deserve.<sup>18</sup>

The righteousness of God, understood within this framework, is an ethical or moral perfection, where God establishes the law and judges all of humanity for its failure to keep that law. This perception of righteousness therefore relies heavily on a legal framework for perception of God and God's activity. Within this legal conception, God is the cosmic judge who casts judgment on the moral failure of humanity. This legal or juridical framework for understanding God is easily comprehended within the Western world's legal tradition. As one participant put it, in speaking about the legal model: "...because it's all through the Bible, and any culture can relate to the idea of having laws that you have to live by and there being consequences if you don't and the whole society's in agreement..." (5/6/5). Closely allied to the legal worldview is a further dimension of thought that we also need to address at this stage: that of the principle of retribution. Belousek contends that, "the retributive paradigm is a worldview that understands retribution to be constitutive of the heart of reality – morality and society, nature and God."<sup>19</sup> He traces the origins of retributive theory back through Cicero to Aristotle, concluding that for these thinkers, "to do justice is to render to each what is due."<sup>20</sup> The parallel with Lewis' description, above, of the justice and righteousness of God "granting to all...exactly what they deserve"<sup>21</sup> is remarkable, given that Lewis is writing of the righteousness of the Christian God rather than referring to the Graeco-Roman worldview. Marshall suggests that because many of the Church Fathers were lawyers, they would have had a ready grasp of the Graeco-Roman tradition, and so were "predisposed to conceive of divine-human relationships in terms of legal obligations..."<sup>22</sup> Retributive thinking has become foundational to a Judeo-Christian way of life, from thinking about punishment of offenders, through the approach of "Just War," to a wider "exchange economy" that operates a system in which "you only get what you pay for."<sup>23</sup> When the retributive model is applied to God, particularly within

---

<sup>18</sup> Gordon R. Lewis, "Attributes of God," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984), 455-56. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>19</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 25.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>21</sup> Lewis, "Attributes of God," 456.

<sup>22</sup> Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 43.

<sup>23</sup> See Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 28.

the framework of the legal language of God's righteousness, the result is a portrayal of God as a retributive or vengeful deity who seeks to mete out punishment on wrongdoers in order to maintain the scales of justice. Evangelical scholars have often reached such a conclusion; for example in John Stott's highly influential *The Cross of Christ*, Stott concludes, "It is inconceivable that God should fail to do justice by executing retribution..."<sup>24</sup> So it seems that a Western legal approach to the language of righteousness, combined with an often-unexamined retributive worldview combine to pile thick layers of cultural presuppositions over the biblical texts, potentially obscuring their original meaning and intent.

In contrast, biblical language concerning righteousness and justice is far more complex, with further-reaching implications than contemporary evangelical presentations suggest. In the Old Testament, two terms are used that are central to developing an understanding of justice and righteousness in Hebrew thought. *Mishpat* and *sedāqah* are commonly translated *justice* and *righteousness*, but each term has a range of translations, and there is considerable overlap between each.<sup>25</sup> In addition, as Leclerc outlines in his study of justice in Isaiah, *mishpat* and *sedāqah* occur as a hendiadys in at least half of the references to justice in the book, and in these instances the phrase refers to "social justice," that is, "justice enacted in the social realm on behalf of the oppressed and poor."<sup>26</sup> Leclerc concludes, "Isaiah's sense of 'justice and righteousness' is very much centered on the real world of his day. This is a significant point: the primary frame of reference for understanding justice is not as a theological quality or a divine attribute but as a way of life for the individual and society."<sup>27</sup> Regarding the Hebrew conception of righteousness, Marshall observes that in the first instance, righteousness is "*comprehensively relational*."<sup>28</sup> God is righteous because he is faithful and keeps the

---

<sup>24</sup> Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 211.

<sup>25</sup> The *spt* root can be rendered, "justice," "judgment," "rights," "vindication," "deliverance," "custom," and "norm," while the *sdq* root similarly has a range of meanings: "uprightness," "vindication," "requirement," "acquittal," "victory," "salvation," "prosperity," "triumph," "mercy," "correctness" and more. See Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 46.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001), 88. Leclerc accepts, and builds on Weinfeld's study of the hendiadys in the larger ancient Near Eastern and biblical settings. For this work, see Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem; Minneapolis (Minn.): The Magnes Press/The Hebrew Univ Fortress Press., 2000).; and "'Justice and Righteousness' - the Expression and Its Meaning," in *Justice and Righteousness: Biblical Themes and Their Influence*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> Leclerc, *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*, 47. (Emphasis in original.)

covenant he has made with his people. Righteousness for the people is, in return, being faithful to the law that maintains the covenant and results in *shalom* for the whole community. In the case of breaches of covenant law, the Hebrew law-court process may have imposed penalties on a law-breaker, and these penalties were primarily for the process of putting right the wrong that had been done so as to restore *shalom* in the community and in relationship with God.<sup>29</sup> In the New Testament, issues around translation become even more complex, where the key terms for justice, based around the Greek *dik-* stem are translated as either just terms (“just,” “justify,” “justification”) or “right” terms (“right,” “righteous,” “righteousness”).<sup>30</sup> Marshall contends that in New Testament usage, “justice” and “righteousness” have the same linguistic root and fall within the same semantic field, whereas in modern usage “justice” is used of the public, legal realm while “righteousness” has gained the sense of “personal ethical purity and religious piety.”<sup>31</sup> Marshall’s discussion of righteousness in Paul’s letter to the Romans highlights Paul’s presentation of the Gospel as being fundamentally about justice, particularly God’s power to bring about justice on the earth.<sup>32</sup> However, problematically, Paul uses forensic justification language as a law-court metaphor to speak of God’s dealing with injustice, and while this metaphor certainly paints one image of God, “to speak of justification as ‘forensic’ and to explain it principally in terms of law may unwittingly serve to conceal what is fundamentally at issue – namely, God’s work of justice-making.”<sup>33</sup> This is a problem because of western evangelical theology’s focus on judicial readings and characterization of God primarily as a judge who dispenses punishment in the heavenly courts. While this is part of Paul’s presentation, such a narrow approach to the breadth of Paul’s Hebrew understanding of God’s justice-making, covenant-keeping, *shalom*-creating, saving righteousness, is ultimately a distortion of Paul’s intent.

In this brief survey of the biblical idea of righteousness, we have left many avenues unexplored. Enough has been said, however, to show that the idea presented by a number of participants, of righteousness as a moral status held by God, by which he

---

<sup>29</sup> For Marshall’s discussion of this topic, see *ibid.*, 45-53.

<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, 36.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> In Romans, righteousness and the righteousness of God are key themes. The phrase “righteousness of God” occurs eight times as opposed to twice in other Pauline letters and three times in all of the rest of the New Testament. *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

judges and condemns unrighteous humanity, is a poor representation of the biblical justice of God. As Marshall concludes, “The righteousness disclosed in the gospel is God’s liberative, forgiving, transformative justice at work in Christ.”<sup>34</sup>

#### 7.4.1.2 God Can’t Look on Sin

Parallel with participants’ presentation of the righteousness of God was an acceptance of themselves as unrighteous. Words used by participants to describe themselves included “filthy,” “sinful,” “guilty,” “ashamed,” “unrighteous,” “unworthy” and “in the wrong.” This state of unrighteousness in God’s eyes results in the “gulf” between God and humanity that is spoken of by participants and represented in many evangelical presentations of the work of the cross. No participants expressed the background or reasoning behind this belief; rather, like the idea of God’s righteousness as a moral standard, this belief seems to have a life of its own, independent of critical evaluation. It is possible that the origins of the belief stem from a text such as Habakkuk 1:13a “Your eyes are too pure to behold evil, and you cannot look on wrongdoing;” but to read this half-verse this way ignores the question that is posed in the second half of the verse, where the writer asks, “why do you look on the treacherous, and are silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they?” This question reflects the writer’s cry in verse 2: “Oh Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” Following this introduction to the book, the prophet has described the violence and destruction meted out by the Chaldeans in conquering the land. This observation of the injustice wrought by a conquering people provokes the question framed in verses 12-13, a question that is central to human experience: if God is just and has “marked them [the Chaldeans] for judgment” (vs. 12), why is it that God appears silent in the face of such injustice? In the context of the passage, it appears that verse 13a is not a statement of God’s character as somehow unable to “look on” sin; rather, it is part of the prophet’s concern that although God is sovereign and has pronounced judgment, yet still the wicked seem to thrive.

It is also possible that the assumption that God “can’t look on sin” relates to Old Testament texts such as Leviticus 10: 1-3, where Aaron’s sons offer “unholy fire” before the Lord and God responds by consuming them in fire. However, even in the most

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 59.

literal reading this doesn't imply that God can't be in the presence of sin, rather, it suggests that sin cannot exist in the presence of God.

Underlying the statement that God can't look on, or be in the presence of sin, is the assumption that humanity and God are separated because of the extreme difference in righteousness. And yet, this problem can be presented in different ways: Is the problem primarily that God is separated from humanity because of their sin, or rather, is it that humanity is separated from God? In the first instance, if God is separated from the people he has created as a result of their sin, this may suggest that God is powerless to overcome the barrier of sin. If however, the problem is that humanity has isolated itself from God by their sin, then perhaps God is not repulsed by the sin or isolated as a result of it. In this case, the experience of humanity being isolated may be in conflict with God's desire to be reconciled. We first encounter the problem of sin in the Bible in the third chapter of Genesis. The narrative is well known, with Eve's "taking of the apple" becoming almost a catch phrase for sinful disobedience. Classic evangelical accounts of the Fall regard Adam and Eve's disobedience in taking the fruit of the tree as the entry point of sin to the human race. The consequence of this disobedience was broken fellowship with God, who, up to that point had been in constant relationship with them:

They sinned when they continuously coveted the forbidden fruit, deliberately decided to eat it (possibly planning to pick it unobtrusively), and finally ate it...Having knowingly and deliberately rebelled against God's rule in their lives... our first parents became alienated from fellowship with the Holy One and strangers to his spiritual blessings.<sup>35</sup>

In a later section, I will raise some concerns about this account of the entrance of sin into the world; at this stage, however, working with the understanding that Adam and Eve have sinned through their disobedience, we might wonder what God's reaction could be to their new sinful state. Were God "unable to look on sin," we might expect him to avoid Adam and Eve. And yet he does not. Rather than avoiding them, God seeks the people out, calling for them as they hide in shame in the garden. He does not appear angry, and despite the caution in Gen 2:17: "but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die," God does not punish the people with immediate death. While he sets out consequences, the outcomes found in Gen 3:16-19, as Rabbi Kushner points out, are what set humans

---

<sup>35</sup> Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, Vol. 2, 207-08.



apart from other animals as moral, decision-making beings.<sup>36</sup> In contrast to expected punishment, God actually provides for the people by fashioning clothing for them. In the following chapter, when Cain is punished for killing Abel, we are told in Gen. 4:16 “Then Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden.” Prior to this, Cain and his family had been in the presence of the Lord: it appears that Adam’s and Eve’s wrongdoing had not caused God’s presence to leave them.

We might also consider texts such as Psalm 139, where the Psalmist says:

Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways... Where can I go from your spirit? Of where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast...

Assuming that the Psalmist was aware of his sinful state, these words are further recognition that God does not run and hide in the face of human sin. Rather, God pursues his people even to the darkest places of Sheol.

A further extension of the idea that God is so offended by sin that he “cannot look on it,” is the proposition that God must punish sin and sinners as a reflection of his holiness. Accordingly, because God is holy, all sin is an affront to his character, and because he is just, he must therefore act to judge and condemn sin. Penal substitutionary theory says that God needs to punish sinners before he can forgive: the Old Testament sacrificial system was a temporary measure to avert God’s wrath by appeasing him, but Jesus, through his death in our place, has provided the one perfect sacrifice so that God is able to forgive. Schreiner, an advocate of penal substitution, frames these principles thus:

Sinners deserve eternal punishment in hell from God himself because of their sin and guilt. God’s holy anger is directed (Rom 1:18) against all those who have

---

<sup>36</sup> Kushner’s insightful chapter is titled, “God leaves us room to be human.” Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (London: Pan Books, 1981), 80-88. Kushner discusses the “punishments” of pain in childbirth, the challenges of sexual relationships, the need to work to earn a living and the awareness of impending death, and concludes, “This is what it means to be human ‘in the image of God.’ It means being free to make choices instead of doing whatever our instincts would tell us to do. It means knowing that some choices are good, and others are bad, and it is our job to know the difference.” *Ibid.*, 86.

sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23). And yet because of God's great love he sent Christ to bear the punishment of our sins. Christ died in our place, took to himself our sin (2 Cor 5:21) and guilt (Gal 3:10), and bore our penalty so that we might receive forgiveness of sins.<sup>37</sup>

If this were in fact an accurate reflection of God's response to sin, then we would not expect to find any situations in which God forgives without punishing: either the person concerned or a substitute in their place. When we turn to the Old Testament however, there are a number of narratives where God forgives sin without any need for sacrifice. In Isaiah 6: 1-9 the prophet has a vision of God. Recognising his sin, he proclaims, "Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts!" (Isa. 6: 5). Clearly, Isaiah expects to be struck dead, having seen God. Instead, one of the seraphs touches his lips with a burning coal and proclaims that his sin is blotted out and his guilt departed. Belousek concludes, "God's atonement for Isaiah's sin is mediated not by a bloody sacrifice but by a burning coal."<sup>38</sup> We might also consider Psalm 51, generally understood as David's prayer following the prophet Nathan's confrontation regarding David's adultery and murder. David confesses to God, "Against you, you alone, have I sinned, and done what is evil in your sight, so that you are justified in your sentence and blameless when you pass judgment" (Ps 51:4). David is aware that the law demands the death sentence for his sins (Exod 21:14; Lev 20:10; Num 35:30), that there is no sacrificial ritual prescribed that will atone for his sins and allow God to forgive him. Nevertheless, David petitions God: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your abundant love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions. Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin." David's cry to God is not rejected: not only is no sacrificial offering demanded of David, but there is no sense that God has turned his face away from David because of his sin. Finally, in the life of Jesus, as portrayed in the Gospels, we see most clearly God's attitude towards human sin. Jesus is the "Word," about whom John's Gospel tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). Jesus says of himself, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). So what we see of

---

<sup>37</sup> Schreiner, "Penal Substitution View," 72-73.

<sup>38</sup> Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 203. Belousek also lists the following examples of God's forgiveness in the Old Testament: Jer 33:8: "I will cleanse them from all of the guilt of their sin against me, and I will forgive all the guilt of their sin and rebellion against me," Ezek 36:25 "I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you," Hos 14:4 "I will heal their disloyalty; I will love them freely, for my anger has turned from them."

Jesus' attitude and behavior toward sin tells us the complete story about God the Father's attitude and behavior toward sin. Time and time again throughout the Gospels, Jesus spends time with sinners, eats with sinners and heals sinners. Arguably he has more time and compassion for those considered sinners than for those considered religious and righteous. In one such instance in Luke 5:20-26, Jesus says to a paralysed man, "Friend, your sins are forgiven you." This of course raises the ire of the scribes and Pharisees because, as they say, only God can forgive sins. Jesus assures them, "But so you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins – he said to the one who was paralysed – 'I say to you, stand up and take your bed and go to your home.'" Later, in Luke 7:36-42, Jesus is approached by a sinful woman who washes his feet with her tears and dries them with her hair. Again, the Pharisees are affronted but Jesus forgives the woman her sins. When Jesus enters the town of Zacchaeus in Luke 19: 1-10, he invites himself to the home of this sinner (v.7). The story concludes in v.10 "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." In none of these stories does Jesus shy away from a sinful person: rather the narrative is quick to point out that his mission was precisely to these people. In another poignant account in John 8:1-11, a woman caught in adultery is brought before Jesus prior to being stoned to death. Jesus, rather than turning away from her sin, takes the remarkable step of identifying with her, kneeling at her feet, as he says, "Let anyone who is among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her."

A number of commentators, as well as participants, also point to Jesus' desolation on the cross as a sign that God had indeed turned his back on Jesus because of the sin he was bearing.<sup>39</sup> The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus' words, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Matt 27:46): words that have been understood as confirming God turned his back on Jesus in his hour of need. Grudem correctly points out that Jesus is quoting from Psalm 22, which concludes with a joyous acknowledgment that the Psalmist has not been abandoned. However, Grudem's claim that a better meaning

---

<sup>39</sup> For example, "As Jesus bore our sins on the cross, he was abandoned by his heavenly Father, who is 'of purer eyes than to behold evil' (Hab 1:13). He faced the weight of the guilt of millions of sins alone." Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 574. "Suffering the anguish of alienation and estrangement from the Father, he cried, 'My God, My God, why have you forsaken me?' Under the wrath of God upon all our sins he was crushed like grapes in the winepress....Jesus experienced the hell of God-forsakenness and divine wrath for the sins of the world." Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology, Vol. 2*, , 400-01. "I mean physically it would've been painful, terrible, but also being incredibly lonely when the people who are meant to be your friends abandon you and even God abandoning you, that's worse....that's sacrifice... its pretty dark..." (7/6/1).

of Jesus' question would be "Why have you left me *for so long?*"<sup>40</sup> does not go far enough in acknowledging what Jesus was perhaps trying to convey in quoting this Psalm. Given Jesus' shortness of breath, a short sentence would have been at the limit of his capacity for speech, and while his cry was certainly a cry of physical anguish, Jesus was no doubt aware of the rest of the Psalm which in vs. 24 reads: "For he did not despise or abhor the affliction of the afflicted; he did not hide his face from me, but heard when I cried to him." Rather than believing that God had abandoned him, as it certainly must have looked, perhaps, Jesus in his anguish was affirming with the Psalmist that God was in fact close at hand, and that in the words of the conclusion of the Psalm, "Future generations will be told about the Lord, and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it." (Psalm 22:31).

#### 7.4.1.3 Conclusion

Brad Jersak summarises the key elements of penal substitution in a way that is, of course, very similar to the concept: "The Problem – The gulf between God and humanity." He lists the following tenets of penal substitution, emerging from a context of "medieval feudalism and Reformation-era juridical metaphors":<sup>41</sup>

- Sin is primarily law-breaking, and God judges sin with death.
- Sin separates us from God, creating a great chasm of broken fellowship.
- God cannot look on sin or overlook it or simply forgive it. For God's wrath to be satisfied, it must be punished
- Jesus bore the wrath of God on the Cross in my place to bridge the gulf between sinful man and holy God.<sup>42</sup>

As I have done, Jersak argues against these theological propositions, suggesting that rather than the cross being about God's need to punish humanity for the gulf that exists between his goodness and our sinfulness, it is instead primarily about God making humanity whole to satisfy his love by reestablishing the connection that was lost.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 576. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>41</sup> Brad Jersak, "Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ," in *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 29.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

In this section we have considered, first, the commonly held notions of God's righteousness and justice. I have suggested that these terms are not separate characteristics of God, where righteousness is a matter of moral perfection and justice operates in a retributive paradigm. Instead, the biblical material often links the two terms with implications for social justice. God's righteousness is seen in his justice, which is most clearly demonstrated in the liberating, transforming work of Christ.

Secondly, I have argued the commonly held view that "God cannot look on sin," does not stand up to scrutiny in light of the biblical accounts. The gap that exists between the goodness of God and the sinfulness of humanity is a gap that humans have created and God is constantly trying to bridge. Rather than being judgmental and condemnatory, God's righteousness is an expression of his desire to bring justice – wholeness and shalom to the whole of humanity. Jesus expressed this as his mission by quoting the words of Isaiah 61 in Luke 4: 18-19:

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

#### 7.4.2 A PERSONAL PROBLEM

The predominant perspective held by participants regarding the work of the cross was inherently personal in nature. Participants spoke of "my sins," "my freedom," "his sacrifice for me," "I've been forgiven," and so forth. While a few did speak about their faith in terms of relationships with others, the most typical narrative involved the use of first person pronouns: Jesus died "for me," "to set me free," "so my sins have been forgiven." The framework of understanding for this type of perspective was, as has been explained previously, that a person's sin means they are under judgment from God that will lead to death and separation from God in the afterlife. Jesus' death averts God's judgment so the person's sins are forgiven; they are consequently saved, and can enter into a relationship with God in the present, and also gain eternal life.

Much of this narrative is present, at least in part, in the New Testament. Jesus certainly came to "seek out and save the lost" (Luke 19:10), though clearly we need to ask what such salvation means in the context of participants' lives. In the Gospels, Jesus does

pronounce forgiveness of sins to a few individuals, and his wider ministry of healing and salvation extended personally to many who were afflicted with various illnesses.<sup>44</sup> However, these Gospel accounts leave us with a number of questions in this regard.<sup>45</sup> On two occasions in the Gospels Jesus pronounces “forgiveness of sins” for individuals, but on two other occasions, “forgiveness of sins” has wider implications: first, “forgiveness of sins” is due to “my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many” (Matt 26:28) and second, it is to be proclaimed “to the nations” (Luke 24:47). These two texts give us the sense that forgiveness of sins has a much wider scope than just the forgiveness of individuals. By referring to the “blood of the covenant,” Jesus locates forgiveness as an act of God who faithfully keeps the covenant he has made with his people. This unconditional relationship of God with Israel is soon to be extended to “the nations,” so that all people can benefit from this relationship with the covenant-making God. Jesus says here that this event of covenant making with the nations occurs through his self-giving on the cross. Similarly, Green and Baker trace the connection between sin and forgiveness in Paul’s letters and conclude, “Apparently, the connection between sin and forgiveness so obvious to many contemporary Christians in the West is not so obvious to Paul. How can this be?”<sup>46</sup> Their answer to this question is to trace Paul’s understanding of sin, particularly as presented in Romans 5-7; we will turn to this shortly. There are, consequently, two main aspects of participants’ accounts of their personal salvation that raise some questions, namely, the nature of sin and the meaning of salvation. We will consider each of these in turn, and do so in light of some cultural biases that modern Western Christians, particularly evangelicals, might bring to their understanding of the saving significance of Christ’s death. Specifically, Baker and Green

---

<sup>44</sup> In particular, Marshall contends that salvation is a central theme for Luke: “It is our thesis that the idea of salvation supplies the key to the theology of Luke.” I. Howard Marshall, *Luke: Historian and Theologian* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 92.

<sup>45</sup> There are only five events referred to in the Gospels where “forgiveness of sins” is mentioned. In the story of the healing of the paralysed man (Matt 9:6; Mark 2:5; Luke 5:20), Jesus says the man’s sins are forgiven because of the faith of his friends. In Luke 7:47 we read of Jesus proclaiming forgiveness of the sinful woman’s “many” sins, which appears to be because of her actions in caring for him. In Matthew 26:28, Jesus connects “forgiveness of sins” with “my blood of the covenant which is poured out for many.” In Luke 24:47, before his ascension, Jesus tells his disciples that the scriptures say that repentance and forgiveness of sins in his name are to be proclaimed to all the nations. Finally, in John 20:23, again after the resurrection, Jesus tells the disciples that, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained.”

<sup>46</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 243. In summary, *harmartia*, (“sin”) occurs 64 times Paul’s epistles: 39 times in Romans and 30 times in Rom 5-7. Forms of *harmartano* (“I sin”) occur 14 times in Paul’s epistles: 6 times in Romans and 4 times in Rom 5-7. They compare this with the verb *aphiemi* (“to forgive”) which occurs once in Rom 4:7, and the noun *aphesis* (“forgiveness”) which occurs twice: in Eph 1:7 and Col 1:14.

suggest that the wide acceptance of penal substitution theory in the evangelical church is a product of Western emphases on individualism and mechanism. Regarding individualism they refer to Charles Taylor's analysis of modern human identity, which has "come to be based on presumed affirmations of the human subject as autonomous, disengaged, self-sufficient and self-engaged."<sup>47</sup> Mechanism is traced back to the work of Descartes and Newton, two thinkers whose promotion of a cause-effect, mechanistic understanding of the world has continued to the present day.<sup>48</sup> Added to this concern regarding individualism, is what Boersma has called "juridicizing," that is, the tendency to see everything from a legal or forensic perspective.<sup>49</sup> We turn now to consider the narrative of personal salvation and deliverance from sin, as presented by participants, in light of this modern lean toward mechanism, individualism and legal acquittal.

#### 7.4.2.1 Salvation

Participants spoke of being "saved" because they believed in Jesus. Being saved included the belief that they would go to heaven and be in God's presence when they died, but also had the more immediate effect of creating the possibility of relationship with God in the present because of receiving forgiveness of sins.<sup>50</sup> These accounts clearly occurred within the modern framework suspected by Baker and Green, and Boersma. Being saved was seen as a transaction that occurred through the mechanism of the cross: the person who was not saved "made a decision" to ask Jesus into their life and as a result received "salvation." The transaction was juridicial because the person was saved from the fate of being judged by God, and was individual because no other person either caused or was apparently affected by the person's decision. Salvation in this sense was entry to life between the lines, where relationship with God takes place and from where believers enter heaven.

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 42. Citing Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>48</sup> For a discussion of the "fallacy of individualism" from a feminist perspective, including commentary on the influence of Descartes, see Polly Young-Eisendrath and Demaris Wehr, "The Fallacy of Individualism and Reasonable Violence against Women," in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (New York, N.Y.: Pilgrim Press, 1989).

<sup>49</sup> Boersma refers to the three "traps" for thinking about the atonement: "juridicizing, individualizing and dehistoricizing." Boersma, "Violence, the Cross, and Divine Intentionality," 50.

<sup>50</sup> Grudem defines "saving faith" as "trust in Jesus Christ as a living person for forgiveness of sins and for eternal life with God." (Emphasis in original). This definition is clearly reflected in the beliefs of participants: Forgiveness of sins is the prerequisite to relationship with God, which can only occur because of Christ's intervention. Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 710.

In the Gospels, there are seven recorded instances of Jesus interacting with people and “saving” them. The Greek word *sesoken* is used in each instance. Its root is the term *sozo*, which is the root also for *soter* (saviour), *soteria* (salvation), and *soterion* (saved/rescued from destruction and brought into divine safety).<sup>51</sup> As the same Greek word is used for each occurrence, context dictates the translation, and on five occasions *sesoken* is translated in the NRSV as “healed.” In Luke 7:50, after Jesus has had his feet washed and dried by the sinful woman, he says to her, “Your faith has saved (*sesoken*) you.” In the final instance, when Jesus gives sight to a blind beggar in Luke 18:42, he says, “Receive your sight, your faith has saved you.” We see, then, that in the Gospels, being saved is an intimately personal event, but it is not restricted to being saved from God’s judgment for sin. Rather, being saved is about wholeness of being; for Jesus to save is to heal, and vice versa. Indeed, in the New Testament context, neither can we say that a healing was solely a personal event, because illness was regularly a cause of social stigma and isolation, so to be saved was a social restoration as much as a physical one. We should also take care to locate discussion of salvation within the “salvation history” of the people of Israel that spans the whole of scripture. As Baker and Green put it, the saving significance of Jesus’ death is oriented “to the salvation of the people of God, not simply to the salvation of individuals.”<sup>52</sup> In this respect, salvation involved deliverance of the people from slavery, deliverance from their enemies and the hope for the future that a Messiah would come and save/deliver the people. Thus, Brondos:

*...for Paul the ultimate goal or purpose for which Christ gave up his life in obedience to God was the redemption of God’s people, of whom Jewish and Gentile believers... now form part... Jesus had been sent by God as his agent to bring about the promised redemption...*<sup>53</sup>

Participants did not report understanding their salvation as something that was related to other people, except in the sense that by having their sins forgiven perhaps there was some sort of healing of past events. Because of the social context, no participants were captives of foreign powers or being held prisoner for any reason. However, they did speak of being set free from guilt and shame for what they perceived as past wrongs. In this sense, perhaps “freedom” is about a release from the guilt or shame of past actions. As one participant put it, “Christ died, for my sins, so I ask forgiveness so they’re all

---

<sup>51</sup> See <http://biblehub.com/greek/4982.htm> (Accessed 17 April 2017).

<sup>52</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 63.

<sup>53</sup> Brondos, *Paul on the Cross*, 74. (Emphasis in original).



gone you know, so you don't have to re-live your past, you don't have to go back and think about it all again because ... he died for those sins. They're gone, they're forgiven" (13/4/4). In this sense there is a psychological advantage gained from the belief that past events no longer have power over a person, just as there is much to be gained from the belief that God has loved you enough to suffer and die for those past events to be set right. Thus, there are no doubt benefits from a personal account of salvation, and yet a purely individual approach risks ignoring a wider and more biblical understanding of salvation. We should also bear in mind the wider call to salvation of the whole world: In Col 1:20 we read, "...and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross"; in Rom 8:21 Paul speaks of the hope that "the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay..." and in 2 Cor 5:19 he writes, "that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us."

#### 7.4.2.2 Sin

As with salvation, participants generally viewed sin as personal failings, actions taken that were against God's will, or failing to do things that they believed God wanted them to do. There was also a wider understanding, for some, of sin as a general failure to be obedient, or rebelliousness against God. This was expressed by one participant in this way:

...this goes back to the idea of sin I suppose... that Adam sinned, and inherent in all humans is this separation from God... the fact that there is this thing of original sin or something you know... I think David says it in the Psalms that you know he was conceived in sin, that even from conception you know, implicit in his unborn state was sin, so that we're born in this world as self-seekers, that's another way to call sin right? (3/5-6).

Even this description of sin being part of the human condition suggests a personal account of sin, as evidenced by the phrase "self-seekers." The general consensus of participants' ideas of sin equated with our concerns regarding mechanism, individualism and legal acquittal: they see sin as specific to their personal behavior, the cause of disapproval from God, and having the consequence of forgiveness through Jesus as the only way around the problem of God's punishment. This perception of sin is of course

strongly rooted in the conventional interpretation of the Fall in Genesis 3: the first sin is the disobedience of Eve and subsequently Adam. Sin is the desire to “have it my own way,” or “thinking you know better than God” what is good for you, and is fundamentally the choice to do what you should not. One corollary of this individualistic approach to sin is that forgiveness of sin is also a personal event. God forgives the individual for their personal failings and restores that person to relationship.

While personal ethical behavior is an important aspect of living, to conceive of sin in this limited way is to underestimate the power and extent of sin. It is interesting to note that in the Genesis 3 account of the Fall, the word sin is not used to describe the events in the garden.<sup>54</sup> Traditional accounts of the Fall clearly see Eve’s taking of the fruit as the point of entry of sin, and the disobedience of the first people was obviously a serious problem, though this disobedience is not specifically referred to as sin. God’s response to the couples’ disobedience is also instructive: though God had commanded them not to eat the fruit from the tree, nevertheless God deals with their subsequent disobedience lightly. Despite the threat in Genesis 2:17 that if they eat the fruit: “in the day that you eat of it you shall die,” they do not die, and though God curses the serpent he does not curse the people. Rather than act retributively, God intervenes protectively, fashioning clothes for the people because they have realized their nakedness. The result of their disobedience is that the people learn to recognize the difference between good and evil, but the truly dire consequence of this enters the narrative a little later. The first occurrence of recorded sin is after Cain and Abel have brought offerings to the Lord. In Genesis 4:7, God says to Cain, “And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door: its desire is for you, but you must master it.” Cain, who is aware of the difference between good and evil, must make a choice, and in this instance he succumbs to the sin and kills his brother. We must note that Cain is downcast because God had no regard for his offering. But the fact that the brothers are even making offerings is indicative of the reality that their relationship with God has broken down: they are no longer walking freely in the garden, talking with God. Now, they feel they need to make offerings to him, a sign that they see God as needing to be pleased. Consequently, Cain cannot address his disappointment with God, who has not accepted his offering: instead he diverts his anger to where it does not belong. Cain suffers from the result of his parents’

---

<sup>54</sup> English translations tend to head the chapter with “The First Sin and its Punishment” (NRSV), or “The First Sin” (CEV), but sin does not enter the text until Gen 4:7.

disobedience: as Adam and Eve were naked and ashamed, so now Cain is ashamed because he sees that he has failed in his offering to God. He is described as angry and downcast, emotional products of feeling not worthy, of being rejected instead of accepted by God, who he thinks he has to please. Cain's relationship with God is broken, but his response is jealous violence towards his brother. Here we see the first consequences of sin acted out in human experience: sin that will spiral out of control throughout the Genesis account and will be the cause of God's decision to "start again" after the flood.<sup>55</sup>

This discussion of sin in the Genesis account suggests that the root of sin lies in the human state of rebellion against God, but also suggests that sin is manifest through violence toward others because of breakdown of relationship and connectedness. However, attempting to define sin is no easy task, for a number of reasons: Paul Fiddes discusses sin as a part of the human predicament and suggests that as understanding of the human situation has changed over the centuries, so too has the perception of sin.<sup>56</sup> One of the consequences of the changing understanding of the problems of humanity is that expressions of salvation also change. He suggests therefore that at the time of the New Testament church, sin was seen as impurity or uncleanness and so "the blood of Christ was an agent of cleansing, wiping away the defilement of sin."<sup>57</sup> Over the first few centuries, oppression by hostile powers was a dominant issue and so "the victory of Christ over the devil and all the powers which threaten the life and health of humankind,"<sup>58</sup> became the focus of the need for Christ's death. In the feudal system of the Middle Ages, the human problem of sin was framed as a failure to render to God the honor due to him, with the attendant problem of being unable to pay the debt that was therefore due. Shortly after this, in the early twelfth century a cultural revolution of an outpouring of emotion in the arts took place, within which the human problem was seen

---

<sup>55</sup> Genesis 6:13: "And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh, for the earth is filled with violence because of them; now I am going to destroy them along with the earth.'"

<sup>56</sup> For Fiddes, the three dimensions of the human predicament that underlie a sense of the "fallen" state of the world are: 1) A sense of alienation or estrangement: being divided from other people and from one's own sense of being. 2) The awareness of our inability to fulfil our potential as human beings. 3) The human state of sin due to rebellion by refusing to accept God's purpose for his creation. Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 6. Baker and Green concur, suggesting: "The point then is that the human condition can be variously assessed. This is true not only because the theological vocabulary of sin is capable of diverse expression, but it is also true because people at different times of social and psychological development manifest and experience sin in different ways. This is also true for people in different social environments..." Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 248.

<sup>57</sup> Fiddes, *Past Event and Present Salvation*, 7.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

as a loss of love, and in this era, Christ's sacrifice was seen as an outpouring of God's love, turning hearts back to him. During the Reformation, the law began to take central place in society, and in an age of political and social turmoil, "it seemed that the only security lay in the absolute claims of law to guard rights and punish offenders."<sup>59</sup> Within this cultural understanding, sin became regarded as law-breaking, with God dispensing punishment as demanded by the law. In the Enlightenment, confidence in the ability of reason came to the fore, with the belief that the human mind alone was needed to solve the world's problems. The human problem was the failure to reach the ethical standards that the mind bore witness too, and the solution was simply repentance and alteration of attitudes. God did not seem to be required in this formula, but the work of Coleridge and Schleiermacher showed that this change was only possible through the work of the Spirit of Christ.<sup>60</sup> Fiddes' discussion illustrates that concepts of sin are linked to cultural context, and that the human identification of the ailments that beset us also change over time. In the modern world, we might continue to wonder how best to understand sin. Amongst other modern conceptions, liberation theology understands sin in terms of oppression and acquiescence to injustice, while feminist theologians have cast sin as "resignation to the social system that relegates them to an inferior status."<sup>61</sup> Many of these notions stand in stark contrast to the ideas of participants, where sin is understood as personal wrong-doing, behaviours that offend God, or a general willfulness that seeks self-realisation before seeking God's will.

Baker and Green undertake a brief study of the "semantic domain" of sin, presenting a range of Greek expressions related to sin. Even this brief study unearths some forty different terms that express some aspect of the biblical notion of sin. They conclude,

'Sin' has many guises...as a whole the New Testament often takes an approach to sin that differs dramatically from our own. Our tendency is often to focus on particular *sinful acts*. New Testament writers, by contrast, tend to focus on particular sinful acts *as manifestations of a deeper problem*.<sup>62</sup>

While individual forgiveness for personal sins is definitely a positive outcome to be gained from Jesus' death "for us," and while participants likewise reported positively on

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>60</sup> For this discussion, see *ibid.*, 10.

<sup>61</sup> D. G. Bloesch, "Sin," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 1014.

<sup>62</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 248. (Emphasis in original).

the peace they received from believing that God has forgiven them for their failures, there are limitations to this individual comprehension of sin that perhaps obscure the darker and more insidious appropriations of sin in our modern context. First, if sin is individual wrongdoing, and forgiveness is God's response, then what are we to make of the biblical notion that sin separates people from fellowship and God's response is to heal/save and restore the sinner into relationship with himself and the community? Second, if sin is individual wrongdoing and God's response is to forgive, then it becomes conceivable that the individual might not change or be healed at all: as Baker and Green put it, "sins might be forgiven, but are we any less likely to engage in disobedience tomorrow?"<sup>63</sup> Third, an individual account of sin may obscure the need to think of sin as systemic evil, the kind of sin that works to disadvantage the poor, marginalized and weak in society. To focus exclusively on the disobedience of Adam and Eve may mitigate against considering the evil of Cain, succumbing to sin and sowing seeds of violence that have become, arguably, the greatest challenge facing humanity. Fourth, we might wonder what an individual account of personal sin does to a person's idea of God. For example, a number of participants spoke of confessing their sins and asking for forgiveness at ages as young as four or five. One participant's father spoke to her about avoiding hell at the age of four. One wonders what sins a four year old is cognizant of, and what value there is in triggering any more than the normal developmental guilt through such an approach, just as we might wonder what sort of God this presents in the minds of children.<sup>64</sup> The participant whose father raised the specter of hell spoke of struggling with feelings of inadequacy throughout adulthood, and though she did not draw any links between the two, we might hypothesise that such an early focus on the need for performance of "good behavior" in order to avoid hell might well have harmful impacts in later life.

If the conception of sin as personal wrongdoing is, as we have suggested, too limiting of the scope of the biblical portrayal of sin, we must return to our attempt to understand sin as an expression of the human predicament in today's world. Certainly we do not need to look far to see the great evils of our day: wars, the proliferation of retaliation and

---

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>64</sup> Erik Erikson's third psychosocial stage occurs between the ages of 3 and 5 and involves the crisis of "initiative vs guilt." A child at this stage of development is gaining in initiative towards gaining a sense of purpose, but too much parental control may become internalised as guilt. Some guilt is normal for the development of self-control and conscience, but too much may stunt initiative.

escalation of violence causing misery in countless millions of lives, poverty rampant in much of the world at the same time as a tiny minority gain huge wealth. Exploitation of the poor, marginalized, women and children is common rather than an outrage. At another level, consideration of the human predicament leads to concerns about relational breakdown, family violence, depression and anxiety to name but a few. How are these related to the notion of sin? In secular language, the term “sin” is almost never used, unless it is overlaid with biblical and Christian themes. While there is a rich biblical narrative about sin, common Christian usage focused around individual wrongdoing has perhaps robbed the term of its power and in doing so made it almost an irrelevant term, or a term that allows serious corporate and global sin to go unrecognized. Perhaps the term itself is so “loaded” with Christian imagery that it is more helpful to use a term such as evil. For example, bombing a village of civilians with a nerve gas, while definitely sinful in a biblical sense, may best be described as an evil action. In these postmodern times, there is, perhaps, a need to re-evaluate the meaning of sin for a world where the term has lost its meaning. Perhaps the narrowing of Christian use of “sin” to refer only to individual misdeeds, serves to heighten this need all the more.

Ted Peters approaches this task, discussing sin expressed as anxiety, unfaith, pride, desire to possess, self-justification, cruelty and blasphemy.<sup>65</sup> In a slightly different vein, Baker and Green discuss Paul’s understanding of sin, and conclude, “*Paradoxically, then, human sinfulness is a sign of both human helplessness and culpability, and the power of sin as the author of human behavior is not a manifestation of human perversity, then, but of human frailty.*”<sup>66</sup> Returning to our discussion of the Genesis narrative, we might also posit that sin is fundamentally a breakdown of relationship caused by the human drive to have things our own way. The immediate result is the souring of relationship: with God, with others, with the living world around us. The flow-on effect from these broken relationships is the human drive to divert our resulting shame, pain and isolation in violence towards others. Violence is therefore worked out in our harming others, harming ourselves and harming the living and physical world.

---

<sup>65</sup> Ted Peters, *Sin : Radical Evil in Soul and Society* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994).

<sup>66</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 244. (Emphasis in original). Baker and Green reference the works of Udo Schnelle, *The Human Condition : Anthropology in the Teachings of Jesus, Paul, and John* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), 63-66. Also Klaus Berger, *Identity and Experience in the New Testament* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 207-09.

Alan Mann also argues against conceptions of sin as wrong actions and instead suggests it might be better to describe sin as “an *absence* of mutual, intimate, undistorted relating that ultimately leads the postmodern self into a lack of ontological (or narrative) coherence...”<sup>67</sup> If this is so, then rather than conceiving of God as needing to come and judge the wrongs and effect punishment, we might instead see God as coming in compassion to heal the wounds of broken and defeated people, to restore and give courage to the weak and to pour love on those who are hurting.

#### 7.4.2.3 Conclusion

In this section we have considered the approach taken by participants that understands sin as personal wrongdoing and salvation as the benefit gained when God forgives the individual. We have proposed that while there is certainly a personal dimension to sin and salvation in the biblical account, to limit our understanding to just this personal experience is to fail to see both the magnitude of the problem of evil and the social dimensions of salvation. For the people of Israel, salvation was seen as being redeemed from slavery, being brought back from exile, being released from persecution and foreign rule. They longed for a saviour who would restore the people in their covenant with their God. So it is that we read in Isaiah 56:1: “Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed.” In this context, sin was the failure of the people to keep their covenant with God and to fail in matters of justice, with the repercussion being captivity to foreign powers. In discussing salvation in the New Testament, N.T. Wright comments:

When God saves people in this life...such people are designed... to be a sign and foretaste of what God wants to do for the entire cosmos...That is what Paul insists on when he says that the whole creation is waiting with eager longing not just for its own redemption, its liberation from corruption and decay, but *for God’s children to be revealed*: in other words, for the unveiling of those redeemed humans through whose stewardship creation will at last be brought back into that wise order for which it was made.<sup>68</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> Alan Mann, *Atonement for a ‘Sinless’ Society : Engaging with an Emerging Culture* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 19. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>68</sup> N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope : Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 200.

To conceive of sin and salvation as primarily individual aspects of a relationship with God is to misrepresent the breadth of the biblical narrative of salvation history, to obscure the importance of fighting for justice for all by confronting evil in its many forms, and to risk loading unnecessary guilt on individuals, especially the young.

#### 7.4.3 AN EXCLUSIVE SOLUTION

Participants were very clear about their idea that only Christians are saved. As we have discussed, being saved primarily means gaining the freedom to be in a relationship with God, together with the future security of receiving a place in heaven. But only those who have confessed Christ as their saviour receive these rewards, while all others are excluded. While this means that participants felt positive both about having a relationship with God, and secure in terms of their eternal destiny, some felt anxious or concerned about friends or family who were not Christians. Interestingly, this anxiety was more about the afterlife and less about what the person might be missing out on in terms of a present-day relationship with God. This kind of thinking was “black and white” in the way it was expressed. Christians were seen as being “in” while others were “out.” Those who were not Christians were quite clearly “not saved.” One participant recognized this dynamic and commented, “...that’s kind of classic... a kind of black and white kind way of viewing relationship with God... are we reconciled to God or not? Have we had our sins forgiven or not? And there’s this or that, and there’s... not a lot of journey perhaps...” (2/3/7). This exclusive nature of faith came to be a central feature of the theory “A Christian Life: Living Across the Lines,” but in a paradoxical way. During the analytic stages of theory development, participants’ descriptions of their faith gave rise to the expression “Living between the lines,” because this described the “in” or “out” experience that participants spoke of. However, as I interviewed more and more participants, I became aware that many of them had spent time “outside the lines” that formed the boundaries of their faith, and many had done so fully aware of God’s presence with them, talking to him or arguing with him: even if that was purely to deny him. This paradox then gives rise to a number of questions about what being “in” or “out” of the faith might involve. For those who spent time “outside” the faith, we might wonder whether they were ever truly “in” before they left. If someone was “in” but then “left” their faith, did they somehow lose the benefits of being a Christian by leaving? In a similar way, we wonder about what value there is for believers in holding to the notion



of being “in” when others are seen to be “out”: is this reflective of fear of the uncertainties of life, fear that can to a degree be allayed by believing that God is looking after those who are “in” his sphere of care?

The roots of exclusive beliefs about salvation are of course found in Scripture. In John 14:6, Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In Acts 4:12, Peter, speaking about Christ says, “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.” And again, in 1 Timothy 2:5: “For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus...” It should be noted however, that in popular Christian thought, these verses are often read with meaning perhaps not intended; for example, the online ‘apologist’ who writes concerning John 14:6 and Isaiah 45:21, “As seen in the verses above, Christianity states that the God of the Bible is the only true God and salvation is only possible by accepting Christ as Savior and Lord.”<sup>69</sup>

The products of exclusive thinking, however, may not be limited just to anxiety for the future wellbeing of loved ones. Taken to extremes, exclusive thinking can create fear or mistrust of outsiders whilst simultaneously bolstering self-righteous beliefs that “we” on the “inside” are the only righteous ones and all others are excluded from God’s presence in the present, and will also be excluded after death.<sup>70</sup> Regina Schwartz argues that Christianity, as with all monotheistic religions, is at its core an exclusive religion that divides people into those who are for God and those who are against him, and that this division lies at the heart of all violence.<sup>71</sup> However, Volf argues that because the Trinity at the heart of Christian monotheism depicts a self-giving community of love, it is hard

---

<sup>69</sup> India Fultz, “How can Christians say Jesus is the only way to God?” *Rational Christianity* [https://www.rationalchristianity.net/only\\_way.html](https://www.rationalchristianity.net/only_way.html) (20 April 2017). My intention in citing from this source is not to claim its academic credibility but rather to illustrate that in popular Christian culture, Scriptures such as these are interpreted in ways that might not have been intended, and these ideas are readily made available for online readers. Isaiah 45:21b: “There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me.”

<sup>70</sup> Volf contends there are “two ways religions contribute to the violence between conflicting parties: (1) by assuring the combatants of the (absolute) rightness of their cause and the correlative (absolute) evil of their enemies and (2) by sacralizing communal identity of one party and correlative demonizing of others.” Miroslav Volf, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice,” in *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 274.

<sup>71</sup> See Regina M. Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain : The Violent Legacy of Monotheism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).

to argue that Christian monotheism fosters violence. Volf suggests instead that the heart of Christian faith is peace-creation, and that commitment to the historical beliefs of the faith, to intelligent thought and moral development, will ensure peaceful outcomes rather than violent ones. He cautions however, “Strip religious commitments of all cognitive and moral content and reduce faith to a cultural resource endowed with a diffuse aura of the sacred, and you are likely to get religiously inspired or legitimized violence.”<sup>72</sup> Volf suggests that Christian faith puts pressure on “its mature and informed practitioners not to act out of persuasion in the absolute rightness of their cause...”<sup>73</sup> and while this may be the case, there is plenty of historical evidence of harsh and inappropriate exclusivity from those who, in Volf’s terms must be “immature” and “uninformed.” McKnight voices similar concerns about the approach of the local church to the gospel and ideas of atonement: He asks, “Could it be that we are not reconciled more in this world – among Christians, within the USA, and between countries – because we have shaped our atonement theories to keep our group the same and others out?”<sup>74</sup>

While, as we have suggested, there are elements that can be found in Christianity positing an exclusive position for those who hold the faith, there are four arguments against such exclusivity. First, Paul writes in Romans 3:23-24: “since all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.” In other words, no person or group is in any better a position than any other, which should mitigate against regarding any ‘other’ as less worthy. It might be argued that the exclusion by Christians of ‘others’ is because Christ has not redeemed those ‘others’, but given that Paul is clear that justification is a gift, there is surely no ground for those who have received the gift to exclude others who they judge have not received it. The experience of participants in this study illustrates that the outward circumstances of life are not a sound basis for assessing the reality of a person’s situation in life: some participants experienced times in their lives where the

---

<sup>72</sup> Volf, “Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice,” 273.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>74</sup> Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007), 5. McKnight cites the work of Emerson and Smith, who, in *Divided by Faith*, conclude, “The processes that generate church growth, internal strength, and vitality in a religious marketplace also internally homogenize and externally divide people. Conversely, the processes intended to promote the inclusion of different peoples also tend to weaken the internal identity, strength, and vitality of volunteer organizations.” Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith : Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 142.

outward signs might have been understood as being “outside” or “excluded” and yet inwardly they were wrestling with, arguing with, dialoging with God. Second, Paul also writes in 2 Corinthians 5:14-15: “For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all: therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might no longer live for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them.” Here Paul speaks to a topic that has since ignited much debate, the subject of Election. The Reformers, and in particular John Calvin, believed on the basis of texts such as Ephesians 1:3-11 and Romans 8:28 – 11:36 that only the ‘elect,’ those given faith by God, will be saved.<sup>75</sup> This doctrine, together with Anselm’s Satisfaction theory, drove the belief that Jesus died for the elect rather than for the whole world, though Nancey Murphy rightly asks, “Is atonement limited to the elect or did Christ’s life, death, and resurrection make a difference to all of humankind?”<sup>76</sup> T.F. Torrance, who writes in this regard, affirms the belief that Christ died for the whole of humanity:

It is an accomplished reality, for in Christ, in the incarnation and in his death on the cross, God has once and for all poured himself out in love for all mankind... That means that God has taken the great positive decision for man, the decision of love translated into fact. But because the work and the person of Christ are one, that finished work is identical with the self-giving of God to all humanity which he extends to everyone in the living Christ. God does not withhold himself from any one, but he gives himself to all whether they will or not – even if they will not have him, he gives himself to them... and no human being can undo or escape the fact that everyone has been died for, and no one can evade, elude or avoid the fact that they are loved by God.<sup>77</sup>

For Torrance, though people may chose to deny the self-giving love of God for all humanity, that does not undo the fact that Christ’s death was for all and that subsequently “all men and women have been ingrafted into Christ.”<sup>78</sup> If we accept this, even acknowledging that some may choose ultimately to deny the revelation of God’s

---

<sup>75</sup> “Election then is defined as ‘the unchangeable purpose of God whereby, before the foundation of the world, out of the whole human race, which had fallen by its own fault out of its original integrity into sin and ruin. He has, according to the most free good pleasure of His will, out of mere grace, chosen in Christ to salvation a certain number of specific men, neither better nor more worthy than others, but with them involved in a common misery.” F.H. Klooster, “Elect, Election,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 348.

<sup>76</sup> Nancey Murphy, “Theological Resources for Integration,” in *Why Psychology Needs Theology : A Radical-Reformation Perspective*, ed. Alvin C. Dueck and Cameron Lee (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2005), 31. For a discussion of “Particular Redemption” and “General Redemption,” see Walter A. Elwell, “Extent of the Atonement,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 98.

<sup>77</sup> Thomas F. Torrance and Robert T. Walker, *Atonement : The Person and Work of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009), 188-89.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

love in Christ, it means that because of God's love for all there is far less ground for us to justify exclusion of anyone. Third, we should note the drive toward inclusion noted in the Old Testament. Though the Old Testament primarily tells the story of Israel as the chosen people of God, there is a thread of increasing openness to the foreigner in their midst. The first indication is as early as Genesis 12:3, where God says to Abram, "...in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." Later, in Isaiah, we read of Israel's mission to "the nations": "I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6b).<sup>79</sup> Though Israel was God's chosen people, Isaiah's vision is of all the nations coming to be included in the redemption offered through the God of Israel. Fourth, this developing vision is further reinforced in the New Testament, as salvation is freely offered to all, including Gentiles, Samaritans, and sinners – in other words to all who turn to Jesus for help. Jesus himself set an important example as we consider exclusion and inclusion: the Gospels record a large number of occasions where he deliberately associated with social outcasts, the ritually unclean and with sinners, all those who were excluded by the religious sect.<sup>80</sup> In all these actions, Jesus consistently broke the expectations of the religious elite around who is acceptable; crossing cultural, religious, purity and health boundaries to reach out to those who needed his healing touch. It is also worthy of note that Jesus did not follow any set formula for offering salvation/healing: some were healed because of their faith, some were healed because of their friends' faith, some were healed not because of anyone's faith but simply because Jesus had compassion on them. Jesus provides the most compelling example of inclusion of all, and in doing so calls into question the exclusion of any from God's grace.

---

<sup>79</sup> Also Isa 42:6; 56:7; 66:19.

<sup>80</sup> For example: Matt 8:1-3: Jesus touches a leper and 'makes him clean.' Matt 9:20-22: Jesus says to the woman who has suffered haemorrhaging for 12 years, "your faith has made you well." Matt 9:24-25: Jesus takes the hand of a dead girl and raises her to life. Mark 2:14-15: Jesus shares a meal with the tax collector Levi and with other "tax collectors and sinners." Mark 10:13-14: Jesus is indignant with the disciples for stopping people bringing their children to Jesus so that he might touch them. Luke 7:36-50: Jesus allows a prostitute to wash his feet with her tears and dry them with her hair. He pronounces that her sins are forgiven and her faith has saved her. Luke 19:1-10: Jesus goes to the tax collector Zacchaeus' house for a meal. Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." John 4:7-26: Jesus meets and talks with a Samaritan woman at the well. After asking for a drink of water, Jesus says to her, "If you knew the gift the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you, 'Give me a drink,' you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water." John 8:1-11: Jesus defends and protects the woman caught in adultery. John 11:38-44: Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead.

John Milbank analyses the blurring of boundaries that has occurred in postmodernity, and then turns his lens on Christianity, declaring it to be, “the religion of the obliteration of boundaries.”<sup>81</sup> For Milbank, the Judaism of Old Testament is a religion of boundaries, typical of primitive cultures that rigidly define limits and isolate them as taboos.<sup>82</sup> In contrast, he clearly illustrates the boundary-breaking nature of Christianity:

For Christianity did, indeed, explode all limits: between nations, between races, between the sexes, between the household and the city, between ritual purity and impurity, between work and leisure, between days of the week, between sign and reality (in the Sacraments), between the end of time and living in time...but above all, with the doctrine of the Incarnation, Christianity violates the boundary between created and creator, immanence and transcendence, humanity and God. In this way, the arch taboo grounding all the others is broken.<sup>83</sup>

Bearing these ideas in mind, we should reconsider the value of holding tightly to a theology that rigidly excludes those who have not met imposed criteria of inclusion into the faith, even if to do so flies in the face of the traditions of evangelicalism. In terms of the model “A Christian Life: Living across the lines,” this would mean rethinking the boundaries marking inclusion and exclusion from faith. Two questions seem particularly pertinent: first, how does God respond to our movement across the lines? And second, how does the church, and how do God’s people respond to movement across the lines? Perhaps the clearest answer to the first question is found in Luke 15:11-32, commonly referred to as the parable of the prodigal son. In this story, the son most clearly “crosses the lines,” dishonouring his father (God), behaving in appalling ways (eating food with the swine) and wasting his inheritance on “dissolute living.” When he finally comes to his senses, realizing that he might be able to get a better job back in his father’s house, he practices a speech of confession and apology and heads home. What the parable tells us about God’s response to this wayward son is nothing short of outrageous. Rather than being offended by his son’s appalling behavior, God is filled with compassion for him. The text does not tell us about the cause of this compassion: perhaps it is for all the son has suffered in the far-off land, or maybe it is because the father recognizes the disconnection from relationship and shame that the son perhaps feels. The son begins

---

<sup>81</sup> John Milbank, *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon* (London: Routledge, 2003), 196.

<sup>82</sup> Milbank’s presentation of Judaism as rigid and boundaried, against Christianity as obliterating boundaries leads him to the difficult question of whether Christianity should be understood as reversing Israel’s mission to the world. To resolve this impasse, he proposes, “This would mean nothing less than discovering a hidden mean between process and limit, between movements and stasis: in theological terms, the co-belonging of grace with Law, and not a dialectical duality of Law and Gospel.” Ibid., 198.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 196-97.

his speech of confession and apology, but the father is not even interested in listening to this: he is more interested in beginning the celebration that the son is home. It seems, from this parable at least, that God is less concerned with disciplining his children for wandering outside the lines, and more interested in welcoming home with love all those who come to take shelter from the harsh realities of life. In somewhat disturbing contrast, if we ask how the church and church people respond to people who move across the lines, sadly the answer is not always one of life-giving compassion. While the church through the millennia has often been at the forefront of care for people, too often the church has responded to waywardness with harsh, punitive, judgmental and legalistic exclusion. Fear of those who dare to think or behave differently has at times led to harsh reaction rather than warm compassion, and for this the church should confess, repent, and seek afresh to be the “light and salt” that Jesus urged.

If God’s redeeming presence is not restricted to the space between the lines, then we ought to re-envision the lives of all people within the realm of divine grace, whether they were aware of, and responsive to this reality or not. Many things, consequently, would need to change: for example, evangelism could not be on the basis of engendering fear, encouraging repentance in order to “save” sinners from a vengeful and holy God. Instead, the Gospel message would be one of the gracious and loving presence of God who has come to walk alongside us in all the vicissitudes of life.

#### 7.4.3.1 Conclusion

In this section we have considered the belief of participants that posits an exclusive dimension to faith and divides “saved” Christians from everyone else who is not saved. While there is some Biblical precedent for this exclusivity, the sweep of the Biblical narrative flows toward greater inclusion, seen most starkly in the earthly ministry of Jesus, who refused to differentiate between people on the basis of gender, ethnicity, purity, religious status, or even faith. The negative outcomes of theology that distinguishes between the included and the excluded are all too clear, suggesting a need to reevaluate such an approach. The evidence from participants in this study illustrated lives of faith that often wove “in” and “out” of faith construed in traditional terms. Rather than being confined to boundaries, we might need to accept that God is present

majestically in the world even in the dark times. We also need an atonement theology that is able to speak into these times.

#### 7.4.4 THE COST OF FOLLOWING

The final aspect of participants' theologies under consideration is "The cost of following." Participants spoke about needing to behave in certain ways in order to stay in relationship with God. While they were generally quite clear that their salvation was a gift that they had done nothing to earn, there was still a sense that behaving in the right ways, and not misbehaving, were important in order to keep close to God. Some participants professed that by serving in the church they felt that God would forgive their sins:

... from being in a church environment you feel like your sins are constantly being forgiven because you're doing things within the church that are connected to this concept of Jesus died on the cross for you, so if you're able to acknowledge that and give back... you're constantly maintaining or preserving this connection to God (16/6/1).

A central idea following on from this was the need to "hand over control" to God, to "die to self" so that God could work out the best outcomes in peoples' lives. One example was the participant who commented: "...acknowledging that the things I want, and I think I want ... aren't necessarily good for me...so... things get so much easier when I... submit to His will, when I relinquish my control" (5/15/6). There was a clear sense that "God blesses" when the believer's behavior is right, with the attendant risk that he withholds such blessing if the person is not adequately submitted to his will. In this regard, participant expressions of being blessed by God implied a causal relationship whereby God blesses those who are obedient or most worthy in some way. Although such causality was not expressed directly, it was clear that moving outside the lines took participants away from God, and into situations that were often unpleasant or harmful, largely because they had moved outside God's will for them. On a related note, many participants said that they had never felt let down by God, because in general he met their expectations and provided what they needed. On the occasions that God did not meet such expectations, most participants were able to adjust their beliefs along the lines of, "God has something better planned for me, he is teaching me to be more faithful (or

patient, or loving, and so on), I need to trust that he will work out his plan, and be submissive to his will for my life.”

This type of theology can be construed as having some positives, as indicated by participants who spoke of knowing that God loves them, and believing that, as Paul says, “We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.” (Romans 8:28). The belief that God is managing the events of life in such a way as to look after his people also creates feelings of security for those who hold such views. This remains true even when God apparently does not provide, because believers can then hope that God has got “something better” in store, or “is teaching me”: both of which are indicators of God’s love being expressed. In addition, many participants expressed their thanks to God for his goodness to him, giving praise for his presence in their lives, his communication with them, and for the ways they understood God to have blessed them. This practice of gratitude has been shown in recent research to also have psychological benefits, and so the belief that God is acting for one’s benefit might be emotionally advantageous.<sup>84</sup> However, for some participants, this type of theology had not worked in the long-term. Several had made a conscious decision to leave the church because of feeling disillusioned or disappointed with God over what they perceived as God’s failure to meet their needs or deliver on promises. One participant had spent ten years praying for healing from a debilitating health condition, attending healing meetings and being told by church leaders that God would heal him. Often such promises came with the proviso that he just had to have enough faith to believe he would be healed. Eventually, he felt he had to leave the church. His account of this is worth repeating again here:

So, no, Jesus you know - he didn’t heal me like I wanted for all those years, like I remember just going to constant healing meetings and you get sick of that crap after a while ‘cos you’re like, its horrible to like get your hope up when some

---

<sup>84</sup> For example, one recent study found that, “Increasing the regularity and frequency of expressing gratitude enhanced participants’ perception of the communal strength of their relationship with their friend.” Though this study was directed at human friendships, there are similar benefits from expressing gratitude to God. Nathaniel M. Lambert et al., “Benefits of Expressing Gratitude: Expressing Gratitude to a Partner Changes One’s View of the Relationship,” *Psychological Science* 21, no. 4 (2010): 578. One study specifically in the religious arena concluded, “Finally, as other studies have shown...feeling more grateful to God is associated with more favorable self-rated health and fewer symptoms of depression.” Neal Krause et al., “Gratitude to God, Self-Rated Health, and Depressive Symptoms,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 2 (2014): 353.



healer's coming around and they pray for everyone, they heal everyone except for you and then you go home disappointed, it's the constant cycle so that's...why I got sick of that typical look of church... I was like, I'm not doing this any more... (19/4/1).

This participant referred to himself as a “rebellious Christian,” because he still believed in Jesus but no longer wanted to do anything to serve God, including going to church. His rationale was that if God would not look after him by granting healing, he would withhold his own service from God. This participant's account highlights some of the more concerning aspects of this type of theology, in particular that such beliefs easily lend themselves to a transactional understanding of God, or as suggested above, a causal relationship of action and response. In this type of understanding, God acts in certain ways because of the actions or behavior of his worshippers. If they perform correctly, he responds with blessing, if they fail in some way then he fails to respond or responds with harm.

J.B. Torrance has written about the contrast between covenant and contract, and his insights are particularly relevant to the present discussion. His comments are with regard to a theological change in the worship of the Scottish church in the seventeenth century, and yet, unsurprisingly, they are remarkably pertinent to the theology presented by twenty-first century evangelicals. It seems that the tendency to understand relationships in terms of “just deserts” is a default position for humanity, irrespective of continent or century. Torrance distinguishes between contracts and covenants. Contracts are essentially legal arrangements by which two parties bind themselves together on mutual conditions to achieve some future goal. Covenants on the other hand are unconditional by nature. Biblically, covenants can be either unilateral or bilateral, and Torrance makes the point that covenants that God makes with people are always unilateral:

Divine covenants have their source in the divine initiative, in the loving heart of God. God conceives of the covenant, God announces it. God confirms and establishes it and carried it through to fulfilment, and the motive is love. The form of the covenant is the indicative of grace - the promise, ‘I will be your God and you shall be my people.’<sup>85</sup>

---

<sup>85</sup> James B. Torrance, “Covenant of Contract?: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1 (1970): 55.

Torrance points out that unilateral covenants do demand a response from the recipient of the covenant, but that this response is simply one of loving worship. A problem arises where people attempt to re-envision the covenant as a contract where “God’s grace is made conditional on man’s obedience.”<sup>86</sup> Torrance argues that this happened with the Jewish people, turning their covenant with God into a contract whereby they had to keep the law to the last detail. The main thrust of his argument is that this shift also happened in the seventeenth century Scottish church, as preachers became legalistically preoccupied with forgiveness, repentance and the need for godly discipline. However, as Torrance puts it:

When you preach legal repentance, you are in fact appealing to the false motives of fear of hell and hope of heaven, and by a doctrine of conditional forgiveness destroying the grounds of Christian assurance, engendering the question, 'Have I fulfilled the conditions...?'<sup>87</sup>

Torrance’s conclusion from the context of seventeenth century Scotland is that whenever grace is portrayed as being conditional, through an emphasis on what believers have to do in terms of faith, worship, humility or obedience, then the good news of the gospel, that is, the unconditional covenanting grace of God can be pushed into the background and worship can become ‘a yoke grievous to be borne’.<sup>88</sup> Torrance applies his concern about the use of contractual language to thinking about the atonement and concludes that understanding Christ’s death on the cross in contractual terms causes two problems: First, the implication is that the Father’s graciousness is caused by the son’s action, a view rejected by both Augustine and Calvin, and second, “forgiveness is made conditional on repentance.”<sup>89</sup> At the same time, the correct focus on what God in Christ has done for all of humanity becomes obscured behind concerns about what a believer needs to do to be in relationship with God.<sup>90</sup> While Torrance’s work specifically references the church in Scotland almost four hundred years ago, there are clearly important parallels with the contemporary evangelical church. Participants’ accounts were replete with contractual language, and comments reflecting Torrance’s “legal repentance” were common. His concern that worship become “a yoke grievous to be borne,” applied to a number of participants who were obviously

---

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 63.

concerned about the need to be impressing God. For other participants, perhaps the yoke had become too grievous because, as in the case of the participant with Tourette's syndrome, they had simply given up and left the church. In seventeenth century Scotland, members of the church probably had far fewer options available to them than do believers today: in the twenty-first century, theologies that demand the contractual arrangements of repentance followed by forgiveness and godly discipline, are perhaps most likely to prompt people to leave the church.

"The cost of following" represents theological beliefs that envisage God as present inside the lines, blessing the faithful who meet the standards for inclusion within the lines. Those who wander through the thinking space to somewhere outside the lines leave the blessing and protection of God, and in that space the person is not looked after, or provided for, by God. My contention that Christian life is typically lived "across the lines," recognizes that God is present, active and involved both inside and outside the boundaries that are artificially constructed by this type of theology. Some participants spoke of their experience of God's presence "between the lines," in the "thinking space" and also "outside the lines." While some participants definitely had some challenging experiences during times "outside the lines," these difficulties were not God's doing, nor were they God's lack of protection: rather, they were the natural consequences of decisions made in life, where natural consequences flow from choices that are made. With Torrance, we propose that the theology represented by "The cost of following," is fundamentally flawed due to "the deepseated confusion between a covenant and a contract, a failure to recognise that the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is a Covenant-God and not a contract-God."<sup>91</sup> The Christian life is life across the lines, because the God of grace is not restricted by boundaries, he is present in all spheres of personal experience, his grace is not dependent on any performance criteria or conditions. It is certainly possible to ignore God, to behave in ways that deny his grace, but God does not respond in kind: instead, he remains faithful and loving, even in the face of the worst of human evil. This is the ultimate message of the cross.

---

<sup>91</sup> Torrance continues: "A covenant brings its promises, its obligation and indeed its warnings. But the obligations of grace are not conditions of grace, and it is false in Christian theology to articulate moral obligation in contractual terms." *Ibid.*, 69.

#### 7.4.4.1 Conclusion

In this section we have considered the category “The cost of following,” which describes participants’ perceptions that appropriate behaviour is required of Christians, particularly because God blesses those who remain between the lines. In addition, the notion of submitting to God’s rule for your life was presented as part of faithful living. While aspects of this type of theology have potentially positive outcomes for believers in terms of a sense of God’s love, and the confidence that he will provide, underlying this is a contractual understanding of God that has harmful consequences. Following J.B. Torrance’s work on contracts and covenants, “The cost of following” was seen to represent a contractual understanding of God’s work in the world, which is a misrepresentation of the covenant that God holds with his people. We have suggested that a renewed conception of God as the author of the unconditional covenant whereby his grace is bestowed independently of any action on our behalf is an important and foundational step for reconsideration of the atonement.

### 7.5 CRITIQUE

Having considered the origins and form of participants’ theologies, we need to begin to draw all the threads together and ask, first, what outcomes these theologies have had in the lives of participants and particularly in their sense of wellbeing, and second, if we can see beyond the stories of participants to enquire about the theologies of the local churches they represent. If participants’ accounts of their understanding of God and in particular the atonement are able to be extrapolated to the situation in the wider evangelical church, is there anything that we might learn about the situation in the church? We will attempt this task in four stages: first, by considering what we have learned about the impact of beliefs on wellbeing; second, by considering the prevalence and role of penal substitutionary theory in the accounts of participants and particularly the implications of this prevalence; third, by asking whether the church has succumbed to a model of the atonement that has been less than the full story of the Gospel; fourth, and finally, to make some suggestions about an account of the atonement that might be fuller, richer and more life-transforming than the more restrictive and narrow accounts that have dominated this study.

### 7.5.1 WELLBEING OF PARTICIPANTS

The initial focus of this research was to establish whether specific beliefs about the atonement have an impact on the day-to-day wellbeing of evangelical Christians. One possibility was that the type of beliefs a person had about the cross would be reflective of that person's understanding of God, and these beliefs in turn would find expression in the person's life.<sup>92</sup> On the other hand, psychological theory incorporating insights into subsymbolic emotional processing suggests that implicit relational representations have the dominant impact on experiences of God and on wellbeing, and that explicit theological knowledge would subsequently be of less importance.<sup>93</sup> From early interviews with participants, three features became clear. First, participants generally had little knowledge, both biblically and theologically, and most were unable to speak with clarity about different metaphors or models of atonement. Even among those who reported that the Bible was their source of beliefs, which is a key element of evangelicalism, there was relatively little awareness of the scope of the biblical narrative in general, and about the death of Christ specifically. What participants were able to say about the meaning of the death of Christ often lacked internal cohesion and logic, indicating a lack of reflection from participants on the subject. Second, while participants generally struggled to present a comprehensive understanding of atonement, they were more articulate when explaining their understanding of God. However, while participants presented a much fuller picture of their notions of God, again these ideas tended to be somewhat limited in scope and reflective of knowledge collected throughout their lives. Though some participants had received some theological training, most were primarily influenced by the lyrics of church music, by the theology of the family they grew up in, and contemporary Christian culture in the churches they attended. Typically, participants were able to offer only passing or incomplete reference to a few biblical texts to reinforce the claims they made. The theology presented by participants was subsequently what we might call a standard evangelical account that was remarkably similar to that proposed in the 1970's in the

---

<sup>92</sup> As Green and Baker comment, "...the metaphors concerning the character of God that are accorded privilege in atonement theology lead easily and naturally to the incarnation of those characteristics in human relationship – that is, among those whose vocation is to reflect the divine image." Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 115.

<sup>93</sup> See Hall, "Christian Spirituality and Mental Health."

evangelistic tract, *The Four Spiritual Laws*.<sup>94</sup> It was also clear that for most participants, having an established theological framework was of much lesser priority than the experience of their relationship with God. Third, with regard to wellbeing experienced in day-to-day life, there was little observable correlation between participants' beliefs about the cross and outcomes in their lives. This was in part due to the fact that, as stated above, many participants were somewhat unclear about their beliefs about the cross. Taking a wider view of participants' perspectives of God, it would still be hard to draw a correlation with life outcomes. Instead, it appeared that other factors played a far more significant role in the present day-to-day experiences of participants: factors including the role of parents during the childhood years, the impact of early traumatic events such as abuse, the educational opportunities afforded the person, the type of life partner chosen and so forth. A number of participants did talk about challenges in their lives, including mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, physical health challenges including some chronic long-term illnesses, drug and alcohol abuse and many situations of relationship breakdown, and some participants related these events to their beliefs while others did not. Some participants found strength from God to sustain them during difficult times, while others found God absent from their times of struggle. Significantly, the specific beliefs about God did not seem to play a role here; rather, as stated before, other factors were more significant in determining the sort of outcomes experienced.

In summary, it appears that in general, beliefs about the atonement are not wreaking havoc in peoples' lives, but neither are they having an observably positive effect. The many other influences participants were subject to had a far more substantial impact on life outcomes, and if anything, beliefs about the atonement appeared almost incidental. In a similar way, wider beliefs about God did not seem to be strongly related to life outcomes. Participants had experienced the full range of life's ups and downs and God

---

<sup>94</sup> *The Four Spiritual Laws* was a tract written by Bill Bright, president of Campus Crusade for Christ, that was phenomenally influential in the evangelical church in the 1970's-1980's. The four "laws" were: "(1) God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life (John 3:16; 10:10). (2) Man is sinful and separated from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life (Rom. 3:23; 6:23). (3) Jesus Christ is God's only provision for man's sin. Through him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life (Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3-6; John 14:6). (4) We must individually receive Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives (John 1:12; 3:1-8 Eph. 2:8-9; Rev. 3:20)." R.K. Johnston, "The Four Spiritual Laws," in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984), 425.

was woven throughout those experiences, regardless of the theology presented by participants at the time of interview.

What this study has not been able to address is the impact of early childhood experience on the formation of “implicit relational representations”<sup>95</sup> Interview questions were able to elicit responses at the explicit level, but were not able to access deeply the subsymbolic, implicit relational framework that Hall hypothesises underlies all relational behaviour, including relationship with God. However, recalling Green’s and Baker’s suggestion that the range of New Testament metaphors for the atonement exists in part so as to be able to address the different needs people have, we might well be concerned about the lack of awareness of atonement models held by participants.<sup>96</sup> The lack of awareness of the atonement, together with the predominantly legal and penal view of God may be significantly limiting the range of metaphors that people could otherwise call upon in order to address their implicit needs.

### 7.5.2 THE PREVALENCE OF PENAL SUBSTITUTIONARY THEORY

Participants generally lacked clarity in their ideas about the atonement. There were a few notable exceptions, and some participants had ideas that were quite different to the majority. However, the ideas that most participants presented tended to fit most easily within the presumptions of penal substitutionary theory. This included participants’ ideas about Jesus’ death on the cross, and also their conception of God’s character. In this sort of faith framework, as has been discussed in detail earlier, sin tends to be seen as behavioural or ethical wrongdoing, salvation is a personal event through which an individual secures favour from God who is otherwise wrathful; God operates on a contractual, transactional and legal basis, including those who meet certain criteria in God’s court and excluding those who are judged to be deserving of punishment. Underlying much of this approach is the fundamental principle of retribution or “pay-back.” Belousek helpfully traces to Graeco-Roman roots the origins of retributive thinking, which he claims has become “our normal thinking.” He then outlines Jesus’

---

<sup>95</sup> For the discussion of Hall’s work on this subject, see Chapter 1. Hall, “Christian Spirituality and Mental Health,” 68-73.

<sup>96</sup> Green and Baker suggest that different understandings of Jesus’ death have the power to address different needs people have: “If people are lost, they need to be found. If they are oppressed by hostile powers, they need to be delivered. If they exist in a state of enmity, they need to be reconciled. And so on.” Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 124.

outright rejection of retribution, which then continues through the New Testament and into the early church.<sup>97</sup> While retribution remains unacceptable in the early church, in the fourth century we find Augustine arguing that “Jesus’ teaching allowed his disciples to deal out retribution under certain conditions,”<sup>98</sup> and the Graeco-Roman tradition had re-established a foothold in the church. In terms of the biblical story of humanity’s predilection towards retributive violence, this is hardly surprising: In Genesis 4 we see the first violence in Cain’s rising against his brother. Rather than kill Cain as punishment, God places a sign on him so that no-one should exact retribution against Cain, with a threat that anyone who does so will suffer a seven-fold vengeance. Within a few generations, Lamech is boasting “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me,” (Genesis 4:23b) and further, whereas God will avenge seven times, Lamech will do so seventy-sevenfold. Retribution escalates at an alarming rate until in Genesis 6:11 we are told that the whole earth is filled with violence.<sup>99</sup> Retribution is a cancer that escalates violence endlessly unless we follow Jesus’ radical call to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44). By the time of Anselm’s “Satisfaction Theory,” retribution is firmly established in thinking about God’s relationship to the world, as seen in Anselm’s proposal that humankind must repay God for his lost honour.<sup>100</sup> By the time the Reformers formulated the theory of penal substitution, retribution was clearly at the foundation of their concerns, and has continued to be so for proponents of the theory, as indicated by Oliver Crisp, who, commenting on J.I. Packer’s influential 1973 lecture “What did the cross achieve?”

---

<sup>97</sup> See Chapter 1, “Questioning Our Normal Thinking”: Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 24-58. Belousek states: “In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus renounces retribution/retaliation, both the philosophical principle (justice is to return ‘like for like,’ rendering good for good and evil for evil) and the popular practice (justice is to render good to friends and evil to enemies). By renouncing retribution both in principle and in practice, Jesus makes clear that the politics and economics of God’s kingdom, in contrast with that of Greco-Roman society, is not based on retribution.” Ibid., 31.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>99</sup> See Bartlett who asserts that, “It is the biblical record, beginning with Cain and culminating in the crucifixion of Jesus, that demonstrates the foundational violence of human culture and allows us to trace it back, generatively, to the dawn of humanity.” Anthony Bartlett, “Atonement: Birth of a New Humanity,” in *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 407. For comment on “The Mark of Cain and the Boast of Lamech” see Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*, 405-07.

<sup>100</sup> For discussion of Anselm’s theory, see Schmiechen, *Saving Power : Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church*, 193-221. It could be argued that Anselm is not strictly retributive in that it is God’s honour that needs to be restored and that is achieved by the divine/human son of God. However, underlying this is still the need for pay-back to satisfy God’s needs, and pay-back springs from the same well as retribution.



writes, “Divine justice is retributive and inexorable.”<sup>101</sup> Remembering the concepts that identified participants’ perspectives of God, we can see that this principle of retribution also underlies these perspectives. God is relational, restorative, exclusive/unattainable, punitive and conditional: all these concepts fit with the principle of God who operates according to the retributive paradigm. This includes the concepts of relationality and restoration, because in the penal substitution model, God restores humanity to relationship through retributive judgement.<sup>102</sup> This sort of idea was indicated by the participant who claimed that it was God who killed Jesus: “I think God did and I think it was, I see it as a supreme act of love...” (10/7/8). So it appears that despite the clear teaching of Jesus against retribution, the example given in his life, and the even clearer example given in his death: both of which illustrate that Jesus was prepared to back his message with his example, even if it killed him; despite this powerful critique of retribution, this principle now underlies the theological understanding of many in the evangelical church, and does so in a way that is largely unexamined. And so we must turn now to consider whether the evangelical church has, perhaps unwittingly, accepted the cultural paradigm of retribution, and if so, how the church might extricate itself from retributive ideas of God and the atonement, and in doing so gain new insight into the scandal of the cross.

### 7.5.3 THE BLURRING OF CHURCH AND CULTURE

Participant accounts indicate that thinking about God, in the evangelical churches they attend, predominantly revolves around concepts of contractually-based relationship, legally-maintained justice, impending retribution for wrongdoing, or for the favoured ones, salvation from judgment. As I have shown, there were exceptions to these concepts, and yet they dominate the presentations of most participants. In addition, most of these ideas were unexamined for participants: it appeared that they had tended to just accept the belief patterns they had grown up with and been presented in church.

---

<sup>101</sup> Oliver D. Crisp, “The Logic of Penal Substitution Revisited,” in *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 209.

<sup>102</sup> So Schreiner: “The theme of holiness is closely related to human failure to obey God’s law. I will endeavour to establish three points in this section: (1) law-breaking is not impersonal, (2) God judges sin retributively, and (3) God is personally angry at sin.” Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” 77. We should note, however, that concepts of relationality and restoration do also fit with other theories of the atonement: when these concepts have been expressed by participants, this was at times in conjunction with penal ideas and at other times it was in conjunction with other ideas.

Underlying these beliefs is the retributive paradigm that is common in human society and is thought also to be the paradigm according to which God operates.

There are two immediate concerns stemming from this approach to the Gospel. First, there is concern for individuals who hear this type of message and gain a parallel perception of God. As Baker and Green put it, “Tragically, many Christians (and former believers) still live in fear of a God who seems so intent on punishing, and much less willing to forgive, than folks we encounter in day-to-day life.”<sup>103</sup> Second, the logic of retribution, where violence is a solution, and punishment takes precedence over restoration, is the logic of the Western cultural worldview (and has been of many cultures over the millenia), but is not the logic of the Gospel. Sadly it seems as if the cultural paradigm of retribution has had a more persuasive impact on the evangelical view of the cross than the Gospel has had on our cultural worldview. While some will argue (in reverse) that the Bible shows God’s retributive justice applied to wrongdoing and resolved in the great retribution of the cross, Michael Hardin provides a more accurate account of the biblical position:

I am asserting that biblical revelation posits violence and its correlates (substitution, satisfaction, reciprocity) as an anthropological datum, not a divine one. This is the revelatory aspect of Jesus’ death and resurrection. It exposes the lie about ‘divine’ violence. ‘Violence is no attribute of God.’<sup>104</sup>

The apostle Paul wrote, “But we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:23). And yet, to perceive the cross, and God’s action in the cross, through the retributive lens of Western cultural thought is to deny its “foolishness” and to see it simply as yet another normal example of the way the world works: God is prepared to punish his son for the bad behaviour of others, to satisfy his justice and holiness and to keep the behavioral balance-sheet in order. In stark contrast, the “foolishness” of the Gospel is that the cross shows us that God does not operate in the retributive, violent way that the world expects. Uncritical presentations of the cross

---

<sup>103</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 242.

<sup>104</sup> Hardin, “Out of the Fog,” 61. Hardin is quoting from *The Epistle to Diognetus* 7:4. He goes on to say, “This is also very clearly affirmed by Sharon Baker, J. Denny Weaver, Tony Bartlett, Mark Heim, James Alison, Raymund Schwager and others, as well as Rene Girard (and Pope John Paul II). Schmiechen contends that ‘to deny divine holiness in favour of an all-accepting love inevitably lead to distortions in both the view of God and human life. It would also involve discounting major portions of both Testaments (17).’ I do not see how our view of God is distorted if we speak of an all-accepting Love. The distortion is to keep together what Jesus and the New Testament writers sundered.” Ibid., 62.

as primarily transactional, legal, individualistic, retributive and violent misrepresent the Gospel and show that the church's message conforms more to the logic of Western culture than to the inverted, radical Gospel.

In light of these observations, I propose that the evangelical church must face up to the challenge of reexamining the cross in the light of the biblical narrative and consider the ways in which the justice of God exercised through the cross counters the dominant cultural narrative of our times. This will be no simple task. Joel Green sketches five insights from the neurosciences about the nature of human formation and knowing, the fifth of which asks, "*Which stories?*" It is therefore critical to inquire: What story is shaping the worlds we indwell? What story are we embodying?"<sup>105</sup> Green suggests that the five observations are useful for a number of reasons: one of which is that they corroborate what social-science investigations into conversion have identified, namely, "that conversion includes a reordering of life in terms of the grand narrative shared with and recounted by the community of the converted."<sup>106</sup> But what if the narrative of the community is, as I have suggested, a reflection of cultural expectations rather than a radically fresh and different narrative? In that case, how does conversion initiate a "reordering of life"? Further, if as Hall suggests (see Chapter 1) knowing is both explicit and implicit, where implicit knowing is the result of subsymbolic emotional processing, then we must further consider the role of families and early childhood experience in the formation of life narratives. Hall's proposal is that psycho-spiritual wellbeing is the result of integration of the narrative (implicit) and paradigmatic (explicit) modes of knowing:<sup>107</sup> if this is the case, then for Christian children raised in church families where a penal, retributive model of God was taught and modelled, there is likely to be an easy affinity with adult church teaching that explicitly reinforces the implicit messages from childhood. Concurrently, for people coming to church from a non-church background, there may be a similar affinity with a penal and retributive understanding of God

---

<sup>105</sup> Green, "Kaleidoscopic View," 180. (Emphasis in original).

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. In support of this claim, Green cites: David A. Snow and R. Machalek, *The Convert as a Social Type*, in *Sociological Theory*, 1983, ed. Randall Collins (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1983), 259-89.; Wayne A. Meeks, *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 18-36.; Nicholas H. Taylor, "The Social Nature of Conversion in the Early Christian World," in *Modelling Early Christianity: Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context*, ed. Philip F. Esler (London: Routledge, 1995), 128-36.

<sup>107</sup> See Hall, "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part II," 32, 40.; also Hall, "Christian Spirituality and Mental Health," 75.

because of the prevalence of this paradigm in the culture. This would be especially true for people whose culture was a rigid, rules-based, patriarchal and hierarchical one.

This challenge to evangelical churches is particularly strong, given the apparent disparity between what has been occurring in the Academy and what has been received in local churches. Within the academic community there has been a vigorous debate regarding the atonement, and penal substitution in particular, over the last twenty years.<sup>108</sup> In early contributions to this recent iteration of the debate about the atonement, feminist theologians argued that penal substitution framed in terms of God's sacrifice of his son constituted divine child-abuse. They also alleged that the biblical narrative of God's sacrifice of his son is inherently patriarchal.<sup>109</sup> The debate has been taken up in the wider academic arena, including by evangelicals, some of whom have joined the critique of penal substitution while others have responded either by defending the theory or by proposing new, carefully nuanced versions.<sup>110</sup> In 2005 the UK Evangelical Alliance held a Symposium specifically to discuss the atonement, catalysed by the publication the year before of *The Lost Message of Jesus*, a critique of penal substitution by Chalke and Mann.<sup>111</sup> The debate has been so strong in fact, that Schreiner, in his defence of penal substitution in 2006, says:

I conclude that the penal substitution view needs defending today because it is scandalous to some scholars. We know that it is scandalous to radical feminists who see it as a form of divine child abuse, or to scholars like Denny Weaver who

---

<sup>108</sup> We refer here to the most recent occurrence of the debate about the nature of the atonement. Stephen Holmes discusses the history of British evangelical approaches to the atonement, commenting, "Penal theories were generally accepted without complaint or comment among evangelicals until about 1800; from that time on there has been a constant undercurrent of complaint about penal theories, and so some explicit defences." Stephen R. Holmes, "Ransomed, Healed, Restored, Forgiven," in *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008), 267.

<sup>109</sup> See for example Brown and Bohn, *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse*. Also Ray, *Deceiving the Devil*.

<sup>110</sup> A sample of some of the many books written over the last twenty years: Green and Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*.; Weaver, *The Nonviolent Atonement*.; Anthony W. Bartlett, *Cross Purposes : The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement* (Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press, 2001).; John Sanders, *Atonement and Violence : A Theological Conversation* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006).; Beilby and Eddy, *The Nature of the Atonement : Four Views*.; Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007).; Finlan, *Problems with Atonement*.; McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement*.; Baker, *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross*; Tidball, Hilborn, and Thacker, *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*.; Mann, *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society : Engaging with an Emerging Culture*.; Flood, *Healing the Gospel : A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross*.; Belousek, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*.

<sup>111</sup> Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; London: Zondervan ; Hi Marketing, 2004).

promote nonviolent atonement. Indeed, among all the views of the atonement, penal substitution provokes the most negative response.<sup>112</sup>

This comment is all the more startling given that it was written only seven years after major US evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* gathered fifteen evangelical scholars to draft a statement to celebrate evangelical belief at the start of the new millennium, and which included the following “affirmation and denial”:

We affirm that the atonement of Christ by which, in his obedience, he offered a perfect sacrifice, propitiating the Father by paying for our sins and satisfying divine justice on our behalf according to God’s eternal plan, is an essential element of the Gospel.

We deny that any view of the Atonement that rejects the substitutionary satisfaction of divine justice, accomplished vicariously for believers, is compatible with the teaching of the Gospel.<sup>113</sup>

In contrast, Michael Hardin drew the following stark conclusion in 2007:

As far as I am concerned, the deconstructive work of Gorringe, Ray, Heim, Weaver, S. Baker and Bartlett, as well as others, regarding exchange theories of atonement is complete. These theories muddy the waters of the good news and inevitably come under the spell of violence, reciprocity and vengeance. The world longs for the God of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the One in ‘whom there is no shadow of turning,’ ‘who is light and in whom there is no darkness at all,’ who does not discriminate but gives bounteous blessing to all by ‘making the sun shine on both evil and good, and making rain to fall on both just and unjust.’<sup>114</sup>

Herein lies a particularly concerning paradox: For the last twenty years, atonement theology has arguably been one of the most contested dimensions of theology in the Academy, with the upshot being that penal substitutionary theory, long held as an incontestable truth in evangelicalism, has been roundly critiqued and found wanting on a number of fronts. However, the limited evidence from participants in this study suggests that little of the academic debate has filtered into the churches attended by participants. In these churches, it appears that ideas of penal substitution and the corresponding concepts of God remain intact and largely unquestioned. My concern is not so much that penal substitution is taught as a model in the churches, because

---

<sup>112</sup> Schreiner, “Penal Substitution View,” 72.

<sup>113</sup> Christianity Today Drafting Committee, “The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration,” *Christianity Today* 1999.

<<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1999/june14/53.0.html?start=5>> (accessed 1 May 2017).

<sup>114</sup> Hardin, “Out of the Fog,” 73.

indications from participants are that this does not tend to happen.<sup>115</sup> Rather, my concern is that the robust academic critique of the foundations of penal substitution does not appear to have resulted in any re-evaluation of the presentation of the Gospel in churches represented in this research. This re-evaluation needs to include critique of images of God that fit with a retributive, transactional and legal model, for as Green writes, “In order to see changes happen in atonement thinking at the popular level, theologians who teach and write must go beyond nuancing the model of penal substitutionary atonement and examine critically the essential logic of the model.”<sup>116</sup> Participants did not say that they were struggling with the ideas of the atonement presented in their churches, and yet, I wonder whether a broader presentation of all the New Testament metaphors, together with a re-evaluation of the assumptions of the character of God, may provide fresh insights and renewed passion for the Gospel of grace. If the “essential logic” of penal substitution is retributive, transactional, and forensic, then a good place to start a re-evaluation would be to examine these notions and instead explore ideas about the cross in the light of a restorative, covenantal and relational understanding of God.

#### 7.5.4 A CHALLENGE FOR THE FUTURE

In light of the suggestions above, in this closing section I aim to make some suggestions for local churches to consider, if they were to choose to address issues around the atonement. My intention here is not to propose yet another theory of the atonement, nor to support one at the expense of others, because I agree with Green that we should honour the full range of atonement metaphors presented in Scripture and allow them each to speak to various aspects of the human situation.<sup>117</sup> The problem for participants was not the atonement theology they held, but rather that they had little concept of the full scope and range of atonement metaphors and theories. Because their thinking has been so significantly formed by the patterns of Western culture, their images of God

---

<sup>115</sup> During interviews, each participant was asked what sources had influenced their perceptions of the atonement. None referred to having received any formal teaching about the atonement from any churches they had attended. It is true, however, that each participant had received a range of concepts, ideas and images from churches, particularly from songs and hymns. However, this occurred for participants in piece-meal fashion rather than as a presentation of any of the theories of the atonement.

<sup>116</sup> Baker and Green, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 183.

<sup>117</sup> So Green: “At the interface of the particular moment of Jesus’ crucifixion and the eternal mission of God, we can find not one but many models of the atonement. So limited is the ground on which we walk and so infinite the mystery of God’s saving work that we need many interpretive images, many tones, many voices.” Green, “Kaleidoscopic View,” 185.

were strongly influenced by juridical, individual, transactional, punitive thinking. In an environment dominated by such thinking, the risk is that different atonement metaphors end up becoming enslaved to retributive and transactional notions, because that is the way God is seen to work in the world. For example, when sacrifice is understood within the retributive paradigm, Hebrew notions of “covering” or “cleansing” can fade into the background, as sacrifice is understood as the offering made to propitiate the wrathful deity. A challenge for the church, therefore, is to rethink its assumptions about God and then revisit the metaphors to see if they can speak more clearly to the human situation. As we read in Romans 12:2 “Do not be conformed to the world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

Participants perceived God as relational and restorative, and both these qualities are reflective of the biblically presented narrative of God’s dealings with humanity. However, participants also presented God as distant, punitive, exclusive/unattainable and conditional. While some of the Old Testament could be conceived as presenting God in this way, it is my contention that such beliefs stem primarily from Western cultural narratives that have formed a platform for reading the Old Testament this way, together with the strong influence of childhood experiences in families that reinforced these ideas. The Gospels’ presentation of Jesus certainly cannot be read this way, and as Hardin points out, “The New Testament writers are asking ‘Is God like Jesus?’ Can God really be this good, this loving, this kind, this self-giving, this forgiving, and this generous? What if God is really like Jesus?”<sup>118</sup> This in turn begs the question: What if God is not in fact distant? What if he is actually close at hand and more present with us than we imagine? What if God is not punitive, but rather “shows love to a thousand generations” (Ex 20:6)? What if God is not exclusive/unattainable, but rather is inclusive of all? What if God is not conditional, but instead is unconditional in every regard? What if God is not fundamentally retributive as culture teaches us, but rather, his fundamental character is restorative? If we were able to shift our focus on these points, then we might perceive the work of the cross in fundamentally different ways. Arguably, humanity’s most devastating flaw has been its propensity for violence, particularly retributive violence. It emerged at the dawn of history and is clearly recognized in the biblical account: by the time of the Flood, we are told that violence

---

<sup>118</sup> Hardin, “Out of the Fog,” 63.

filled the earth. God covenanted with his people, pledging his unconditional love and faithfulness, and yet, violence continued unabated. It finally reached its appalling zenith when humanity reached out its collective hands, “rose up against God and killed him.”<sup>119</sup> The stage was set for God to engage his full retributive might and finally dispense with the evil of humanity’s cancer. But it did not happen. Instead, we learned that retribution is not God’s way. God’s response, in contrast, was to suffer and forgive, or as Heim puts it:

God enters into the position of the victim of sacrifice (a position already defined by human practice) and occupies it so as to be able to act from that place to reverse sacrifice and redeem us from it. God steps forward in Jesus to be one subject to the human practice of atonement in blood, not because that is God’s preferred logic or because this itself is God’s aim, but because this is the very site where human bondage and sin are enacted.<sup>120</sup>

The death of Christ on the cross is therefore not transactional, neither is it retributive: instead it is fundamentally relational, as God goes to the extreme limits of participation in human suffering in order to redeem us and to show us the way out of the spiral of retributive violence. As James Alison writes:

It is quite clear from the New Testament that what really excited Paul was that from Jesus’ self-giving, and the ‘outpouring of Jesus’ blood,’ that this was the revelation of who God was: God was entirely without vengeance, entirely without substitutionary tricks. And that he was giving himself entirely without ambivalence and ambiguity for *us*, towards *us*, in order to set *us* ‘free from our sins’ – ‘our sins’ being our way of being bound up with other in death, vengeance, violence and what is commonly called ‘wrath.’<sup>121</sup>

The cross is a scandal. God in Jesus is accused, mocked and killed. Now we are shown in practice what Jesus has taught: forgive and do not take justice into your own hands through retribution. Jesus accepts all the sin, hatred, and evil that is thrown at him, even to the point of death. That God raised Jesus from death reveals that our sin and evil does not have power finally to defeat God’s purposes of life. As Hardin comments, “The scandal of the cross is forgiveness. At the place our theologies typically spy wrath,

---

<sup>119</sup> Genesis 4:8 “And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel, and killed him.” For Bartlett’s presentation of the foundation violence of human culture, see Bartlett, “Atonement: Birth of a New Humanity,” 406-08.

<sup>120</sup> S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice : A Theology of the Cross* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 143.

<sup>121</sup> James Alison, “God’s Self-Substitution and Sacrificial Inversion,” in *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007), 175.



our eyes, like those of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, are opened, to see 'love divine, all loves excelling' and so embrace the scandal of divine forgiveness."<sup>122</sup>

Retributive, transactional notions of the cross are easily understood and accepted because culturally they make "good sense" in terms of the current Western cultural worldview. It is also quite easy to apply these same paradigms to the entire Biblical narrative and interpret God's character and actions within the same worldview. Such an approach is probably quite comfortable because it sits within our expectations of the way the world works; it also allows us to erect barriers to exclude "the other" on the basis of our notions of God, and exclusion of others is a safe option in what is at times a scary world. If God's action through the cross is genuinely seen as a scandal, an action that turns all our expectations upside down, we might need to confront comfortable and easy interpretations of the cross and instead allow ourselves to be scandalized. This could be a difficult task, but the depth of riches to be discovered would surely make such a journey worthwhile.

In drawing this discussion to a close, let us recall two particularly striking comments offered by participants; comments that reflect a deep journey into discovery of the meaning of the cross. The first insight is from a participant whose marriage had broken up following her partner's affair with her best friend. She struggled for a long time with the anger she felt, but one evening visited friends who were watching the 1995 movie *Braveheart*. At the end of the movie, William Wallace is being tortured to death in front of a jeering crowd; my participant picks up the story:

If that was Patrick or Jackie I would totally be in the crowd cheering them on you know... and I guess it made me think about God in a new way, think about, I mean obviously that's an extreme anger that... but, realizing how I felt being betrayed and how we betray God every day... for me that was my journey toward forgiveness was to actually realize, not... I couldn't just let it go, there was no way to let something that big go, but to realize that justice had been done... and that when Jesus died on the cross for my sins he died on the cross for their sins too (8/2/5).

The second insight comes from a participant who had been through a great deal of personal trauma, including childhood sexual abuse. I asked her how she thought Jesus'

---

<sup>122</sup> Hardin, "Out of the Fog," 72.

death on the cross changed things. I have quoted her response in an earlier section, but include it again here because of the depth of insight that it represents:

...when he was taken off the cross he died, he was a dead human being... he was God incarnate... God died, God died for a time...and the amount of time doesn't matter I think its so infinitesimal that we don't know, it could take whatever, that's quantum physics...but he truly truly died. God, God truly died... goodness died, ...love died, hope died, everything died, it died because it had to be reset, its like a reset button, the wages of sin are death... so this idea of resurrection is a brand new beginning of life, the first seed of true life...that's amazing isn't it? (15/14-15)

Jesus' death: a reset button on the cosmos. Bartlett expresses this in a similar way:

When the writers of the New Testament grasped the enormous transforming power of Christ they concluded that he was in fact the constituting source of creation itself. In first Corinthians Paul, talking about the multitude of cultural gods and lords, suddenly, and in contrast, concludes, 'yet for us there is one God...and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist' (1 Cor. 8.6)... It's as if the human regenerative experience of Jesus was so enormous, so profound and so endless in its implications, that the whole cosmos was felt to begin all over again through him. And what was true epistemologically, in terms of meaning, then became true ontologically – everything did in fact come into being through him.<sup>123</sup>

## 7.6 CONCLUDING SUMMARY

In the Gospel according to John, Jesus claims, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Later, in his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul writes, "But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). These texts, and many more in both Old and New Testaments, make claims about Jesus' life and death that are understood by Christians as central to the core beliefs of Christian faith. The atonement, however, has resisted attempts throughout the centuries to define it as a doctrine, and though beliefs about Jesus' death are so central to the lives of people of faith, the interpretation of scripture regarding what Jesus' death means, what it has achieved and how people are changed as a result, remains an area of much discussion. Debate in the Academy over the last twenty years has brought renewed interest in the atonement in many quarters, and resulted in re-examination of the atonement, both in terms of scriptural understanding and regarding the cultural presuppositions that we, as twenty-first century Christians,

---

<sup>123</sup> Bartlett, "Atonement," 410.

bring to our understanding of Christ's death for us. Theories of the atonement make claims about outcomes in the lives of those who believe: for example, Jesus' death means that the faithful will be forgiven, receive eternal life, find "salvation," and so forth, and these claims are almost invariably the sort of outcomes that should have positive psychological and social outcomes in the lives of believers. On the other hand, some approaches to the atonement make claims about God, and his involvement in the death of Jesus, that might not be considered in such a positive light. As one example, the idea presented in penal substitutionary theory that God poured his wrath out on Jesus, so that believers will be spared and made acceptable to God, posits an idea of God as potentially angry, vindictive and retributive; an idea that perhaps would incline a believer to be wary of such a God. For a person with this sort of notion of God, we might wonder whether life outcomes would be more negative, generating fear or anxiety. A further factor of interest concerns whether specific theological beliefs are likely to have a correlation with a believer's psychospiritual wellbeing, or whether specific beliefs are less significant and instead there are other factors that carry greater significance.

These concerns led to the formulation of this thesis, which set out to explore whether beliefs about the atonement held by evangelical Christians have an impact on their experience of life and sense of wellbeing. The restriction to evangelical Christians was to limit the scope of the study for practical reasons, and also because as a Christian who has been involved in evangelical churches for thirty years or more, I have a personal concern with the way the commonly presented version of penal substitution impacts on the way evangelicals come to understand the character of God.

An early decision was made that this research should be a qualitative study in which participants would be interviewed in order to explore their understandings of the cross and gain insights into their experience of life. Constructivist grounded theory was chosen as the methodology best suited for this type of research; nineteen interviews were conducted with evangelical Christians, and the resulting data was then analysed following the methodological principles of constructivist GT. A number of observations can be made about the results, though it is important to point out that the limits on the sample size mean that the grounded theory produced, namely: "A Christian life, living across the lines," is a substantive theory, applicable to evangelical Christians as

represented by the participants. The first observation is that the participants were relatively ill informed about atonement theory. They all had ideas about the cross and notions of God's action through the cross, but these ideas were generally not representative of the classic formulations of atonement theory adopted by the church over the centuries. Participants' ideas about the atonement seemed to be gathered from a whole range of sources and typically were not well thought-through. Having said that, the ideas that most participants presented most closely resembled the penal substitutionary theory, which was not surprising, given the centrality of penal substitution in evangelical theology. Although very few participants knew the term 'penal substitution,' most of their ideas about the cross, and about God, fitted with the assumptions of this theory. Secondly, although most participants were not particularly clear about the work of the cross, they were all able to clearly articulate a wider narrative of God at work in their lives, including ideas about God's character, God's way of relating to them in daily life and their ways of responding to him. All participants had been Christians for most of their lives and so their narratives of relationship with God encompassed the ups and downs of human life. Third, in terms of my aim of establishing whether beliefs about the atonement have an impact on the wellbeing of believers, the research led to the conclusion that for this group of participants there was no observable impact of specific beliefs on experience of wellbeing. This was partly because many participants were relatively unclear about their specific beliefs, even though the general tone was one of penal substitution; and partly because it appeared that more fundamental "subsymbolic" or implicit understandings potentially played a bigger role in predicting wellbeing than the specific area of atonement beliefs. All participants had the overall belief "God loves me, Jesus died for me, I'm forgiven/saved" and that belief held the most important place in their thinking: specific beliefs about how Jesus' death showed God's love or accomplished forgiveness were much less important. There were, of course, a number of limitations to the research that are important in thinking about the findings. First, the sample was limited to evangelical Christians as a feature of design, but this excluded other Protestant believers as well as Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians. It would certainly have been interesting to include believers from a wider range of expressions of the faith. More significantly, on account of the relatively small sample size, the study could not capture the full range of experience of evangelical Christians. A notable limitation is that all participants in this research had come from Christian families or had early exposure to the faith. The only exception was

one participant who came to the faith from a non-church background at the age of nineteen. Subsequently, most participants' narratives were of a life of faith going back to their earliest memories. In contrast to this, some evangelical Christians come to the faith through conversion experiences as adults, and some of these are from very difficult backgrounds. It would be interesting to know for these believers whether their understanding of the atonement played a role in their conversion and later life. I suspect that much like the participants in this study, it is the belief that God loves you and has gone to great lengths in the event of the cross to "save" you, that is the predominant influence for change, but this is a speculation that is worthy of further research.

A number of interesting conclusions have been drawn from this research. The first is the general lack of awareness of theology in the sample of participants. The average age of participants was forty-four, and as has been stated, most had been Christian for much of their lives, and active in churches that held a high view of the authority of the Bible in matters of faith. While most had a range of ideas about the cross and Jesus' death, as it applied to their understanding of their personal relationship with God, there was an overall lack of awareness of the historical models of the atonement in the church, and of the scope of the biblical narrative as it tells the story of creation, covenant, redemption, salvation, and of Jesus as fulfillment of the narrative. The second main point of interest is the lack of connection seen between the specific beliefs held by participants and their accounts of their personal wellbeing. It seemed that specific beliefs were much less important than the participant's overall view of God. This was perhaps best illustrated by the participant who gave a stark account of his view that God had poured his wrath out on Jesus, killing him on the cross: "I believe that God punished Jesus for that... the wrath that should've been directed at me, did get directed at Christ..." (10/4/2). When I asked what it was like for this participant, knowing that God his father had dealt with Jesus his son in such a way, his response was, "I don't have a problem that God did that to his son... I see it as a loving response not as a vindictive or a wrathful activity..." (10/14/1). This seemed true, though perhaps to a lesser degree for all participants: their central belief that God is good, loves them and wants the best for them, seemed to override any specific beliefs that might imply anything to the contrary. The third point of interest was represented by the identification of the two categories "Living between the lines," and "Patterns in the thinking space" and the formulation of the theory "A Christian life: living across the lines." Typical evangelical approaches to faith posit clear

boundaries around the decision to accept Christ, followed by the disciplines of living as a Christian. It was a surprise, therefore, to find within the participants much experience of time outside the lines. Most significantly, many of these participants spoke of their dealings with God in these times of their lives outside the lines.

A number of implications proceed from these findings. First, there are implications for evangelical churches, which I suggest are on two levels. It seemed from participants' accounts of their sources of learning about the cross that a number of factors were involved, but preaching or teaching in the church did not feature significantly. In evangelical churches there will be many references made to Jesus' death, most notably during a time of Communion; and so churches will no doubt be giving messages about the atonement in many ways, simply by the type of language used at these times. Few participants, however, could recall sustained teaching about the atonement. This is a shame because the wide array of biblical metaphors and the range of historical models about the atonement are a rich resource that can provide different ways of understanding the cross, and to limit understanding of the cross to one model limits access to these resources. A greater understanding of different metaphors and theories of atonement could allow believers to discover aspects of the atonement that can speak directly to implicit needs and bring a healing to these deep areas of need. This does raise a more significant question, however, which is the approach taken to the atonement. Traditional formulations of evangelical theology rely heavily on penal substitutionary theory and some even suggest that any other approach to the atonement cannot be evangelical. However, work in the Academy over the last few decades has provided important critiques of penal substitution and suggested a range of helpful alternatives. I have presented and critiqued some of this discussion in Chapters 2 and 7, and suggest here that it would be very helpful if more of the academic debate were to make its way into the life and discussion of evangelical churches rather than being restricted to the Academy. A good number of books, both academic, and more accessible, have been written, so there is a helpful body of resources now available. A second implication is a challenge arising from the theory "Living across the lines." Evangelical theology typically has a narrow view of the Christian life as between the lines or boundaries of specific beliefs and behaviours. In such a paradigm, two consequences are implied: first, God is restricted to being present with, and blessing those within the lines, and second, people need to perform or behave in ways that maintain God's presence and blessing. I

have argued above that such an approach both restricts understanding of God's work to a chosen few, denying the inclusive trajectory of the biblical story, and views God as working in contractual rather than covenantal relationship. Both these perspectives fall short of a biblical understanding of the nature of God's work in the world through Christ. Consequently, "Living across the lines" encourages us to think again about the nature of God. The parable of the two sons and a gracious father in Luke 15: 11-32 is instructive in this regard: when the prodigal son is away in a foreign land feeding the pigs, he has not forgotten his father. More importantly, despite his actions, his father still treats him as his son. The older brother, who has worked hard without a break, sees his relationship with his father in contractual terms, and in doing so has removed himself from the father's love as far as his younger brother. In doing so he has been living outside the reality that we read of in vs.31: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours." Both sons have lived across the lines and yet they are still sons and the father still loves and treats them as such. Finally, in drawing these concluding comments to a close, I do so with the words of Paul in his letter to the Romans 8: 38-39:

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.





## References

- Abbott, Curtis. "The Blood of Recognition–Atonement and Transference in Psychoanalytically Based Pastoral Psychotherapy." *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 10, no. 4 (2008): 265-307.
- Ainsworth, M.D.S., and S.M. Bell. "Attachment Exploration, and Separation: Illustrated by the Behavior of One-Year-Olds in a Strange Situation." *Child Development* 41 (1970): 49-67.
- Alison, James. "God's Self-Substitution and Sacrificial Inversion." In *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, edited by Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Andrews, Tom. "What Is Social Constructionism?" *The Grounded Theory Review* 11, no. 1 (2012): 39-46.
- Atkinson, P, and D. Silverman. "Kundera's Immortality: The Interview Society and the Invention of the Self." *Qualitative Enquiry* 3, no. 3 (1997): 304-25.
- Aulen, Gustaf *Christus Victor : An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement*. Translated by A. G. Hebert. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1953.
- Backman, K., and H. A. Kyngäs. "Challenges of the Grounded Theory Approach to a Novice Researcher." *Nursing & Health Sciences* 1, no. 3 (1999): 147-53.
- Baker, Mark D. *Proclaiming the Scandal of the Cross : Contemporary Images of the Atonement*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2006.
- Baker, Mark D., and Joel B. Green. *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross : Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2011.
- Baker, Sharon. "The Repetition of Reconciliation: Satisfying Justice, Mercy and Forgiveness." In *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 220-41. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Balmer, Randall Herbert. *The Making of Evangelicalism : From Revivalism to Politics, and Beyond*. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2010.
- Barnett, Dori. "Constructing New Theory for Identifying Students with Emotional Disturbance: A Constructivist Approach to Grounded Theory." *The Grounded Theory Review* 11, no. 1 (2012): 47-58.
- Bartlett, Anthony. "Atonement: Birth of a New Humanity." In *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 406-21. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Bartlett, Anthony W. *Cross Purposes : The Violent Grammar of Christian Atonement*. Harrisburg PA: Trinity Press, 2001.
- Bebbington, D. W. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain : A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- Beilby, James K., and Paul R. Eddy. *The Nature of the Atonement : Four Views*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006.
- Belousek, Darrin W. Snyder. *Atonement, Justice, and Peace : The Message of the Cross and the Mission of the Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2012.
- Benner, David G. *Psychotherapy and the Spiritual Quest*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1988.
- Benson, P, and B Spilka. "God Image as a Function of Self-Esteem and Locus of Control." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 12 (1973): 297-310.
- Berger, Klaus. *Identity and Experience in the New Testament*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003.

- Berger, P., and T. Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality*. London: Penguin, 1991.
- Bergin, Allen E. "Religiosity and Mental Health: A Critical Reevaluation and Meta-Analysis." *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice* 14, no. 2 (1983): 170-84.
- Beuken, W.A.M. "The Main Theme of Trito-Isaiah 'the Servants of Yahweh'." *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 47 (1990): 67-87.
- Birks, Melanie, Ysanne Chapman, and Karen Francis. "Memoing in Qualitative Research: Probing Data and Processes." *Journal of Research in Nursing* 13, no. 1 (2008): 68-75.
- Birks, Melanie, and Jane Mills. *Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide*. Los Angeles, CA: Sage, 2011.
- Birky, Ian T. "Parental Trait Influence on God as an Object Representation." *Journal of Psychology* 122, no. 2 (1988): 133-37.
- Blenkinsopp, Joseph. *Isaiah 40-55: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 2002.
- Bloesch, D. G. . "Sin." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, 1012-15. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Blumer, Herbert. *Symbolic Interactionism*. Eaglewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1969.
- Boeije, H. R. "A Purposeful Approach to the Constant Comparative Method in the Analysis of Qualitative Interviews." *Quality & Quantity* 36, no. 4 (2002): 391-409.
- Boersma, Hans. *Violence, Hospitality and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2004.
- Boersma, Hans. "Violence, the Cross, and Divine Intentionality: A Modified Reformed View." In *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*, edited by John Sanders, 47-79. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.
- Borchert, G.L. "Wrath, Destruction." In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, edited by Gerald F. Hawthorne, Ralph P. Martin and Daniel G. Reid, 991-93. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Borg, M. "Executed by Rome, Vindicated by God." In *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 150-65. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Boychuk Duchscher, Judy E., and Debra Morgan. "Grounded Theory: Reflections on the Emergence Vs. Forcing Debate." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 48, no. 6 (2004): 605-12.
- Boyd, Gregory A. "Christus Victor View." In *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, 23-49. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006.
- Brichto, Herbert Chanan. *On Slaughter and Sacrifice, Blood and Atonement*. [Cincinnati]: [Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion], 1976.
- Brokaw, Beth, and Keith J. Edwards. "The Relationship of God Image to Level of Object Relations." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 22, no. 4 (1994): 352-71.
- Brondos, David A. *Paul on the Cross: Reconstructing the Apostle's Story of Redemption*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006.
- Brown, Joanne Carlson, and Carole R. Bohn. *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*. New York, N.Y: Pilgrim Press, 1989.
- Brown, Joanne Carlson, and Rebecca Parker. "For God so Loved the World?" In *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, 1-30. New York, N.Y: Pilgrim Press, 1989.
- Bryant, A. "Re-Grounding Grounded Theory." *Journal of Information Technology Theory and Application* 4, no. 1 (2002): 25-42.

- Bryant, Anthony, and Kathy Charmaz. "Grounded Theory in Historical Perspective: An Epistemological Account." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 31-57. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- — —. "Introduction: Grounded Theory Research: Methods and Practices." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 1-28. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- Bryant, Antony, and Kathy Charmaz. *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- Bulkeley, Tim. *Not Only a Father : Talk of God as Mother in the Bible & Christian Tradition*. Auckland, N.Z.: Archer Press, 2011.
- Bushnell, Horace. *The Vicarious Sacrifice, Grounded in Principles of Universal Obligation*. New York: C. Scribner & Co., 1866.
- Catherwood, Christopher. *The Evangelicals : What They Believe, Where They Are, and Their Politics*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 2010.
- Chalke, Steve. "The Redemption of the Cross." In *The Atonement Debate*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 34-48. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008.
- Chalke, Steve, and Alan Mann. *The Lost Message of Jesus*. Grand Rapids, Mich.; London: Zondervan; Hi Marketing, 2004.
- Charmaz, Kathy. *Constructing Grounded Theory*. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2014.
- — —. *Constructing Grounded Theory : A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2006.
- — —. "Grounded Theory Methodology: Objectivist and Constructivist Qualitative Methods." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 509-35. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000.
- — —. "The Legacy of Anselm Strauss in Constructivist Grounded Theory." *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 32 (2008): 127-41.
- — —. "Shifting the Grounds: Constructivist Grounded Theory Methods." In *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation*, ed. Janice M. Morse, Phyllis Noerager Stern, Juliet M. Corbin, Barbara Bowers, Kathy Charmaz and Adele E. Clarke, 127-47. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009.
- Childs, Brevard S. *Isaiah*. Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001.
- Clarke, Adele E. *Situational Analysis: Grounded Theory after the Postmodern Turn*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005.
- Christianity Today Drafting Committee. "The Gospel of Jesus Christ: An Evangelical Celebration." *Christianity Today*, 1999.
- Cook, Kaye V., and Hillman Elizabeth. "Christian Views of Self and God: Context Matters." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 34, no. 2 (2006): 133.
- Corbin, Juliet M., and Anselm L. Strauss. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*. Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2008.
- Corsini, Raymond J., and Danny Wedding. *Current Psychotherapies*. Itasca, Ill.: F.E. Peacock Publishers, 1995.
- Cranfield, C.E.B. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*. Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1975.
- Crisp, Oliver D. "The Logic of Penal Substitution Revisited." In *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 208-27. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Crotty, Michael. *The Foundations of Social Research : Meaning and Perspective in the Research Process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998.

- Culbertson, Philip Leroy. *Caring for God's People : Counseling and Christian Wholeness*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000.
- Dey, Ian. "Grounding Categories." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 167-90. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- Dodd, C. H. *The Bible and the Greeks*. London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935.
- — —. *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* New York: Harper & Row, 1932.
- Draucker, Claire B., Donna S. Martsolf, Ratchneewan Ross, and Thomas B. Rusk. "Theoretical Sampling and Category Development in Grounded Theory." *Qualitative Health Research* 17, no. 8 (2007): 1137-48.
- Driver, John. *Understanding the Atonement for the Mission of the Church*. Scottdale, Pa.: Herald Press, 1986.
- Dunn, James D. G. *The Theology of Paul the Apostle*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1998.
- Edwards, Jonathan. *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*. Boston: Kneeland & Green, 1741.
- Edwards, K. "Religious Experience as a Function of Self-Concept and Interpersonal Behaviour." LaMirada, CA: Rosemead Graduate School of Psychology, Biola College, 1977.
- Edwards, K., G. Goldberg, J. Hargrove, and C. Linamen. "Religious Experience as a Function of Self-Concept and Interpersonal Behaviour." LaMirada, CA: Rosemead School of Psychology, Biola College, 1979.
- Ekblad, E. Robert. "God Is Not to Blame: The Servant's Atoning Suffering according to the LXX of Isaiah 53." In *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 180-207. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Elwell, Walter A. "Extent of the Atonement." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 98-100. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Emerson, Michael O., and Christian Smith. *Divided by Faith : Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Entwistle, David N., and Stephen K. Moroney. "Integrative Perspectives on Human Flourishing: The Imago Dei and Positive Psychology." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no. 4 (2011): 295.
- Fairbairn, W. Ronald D. *An Object Relations Theory of the Personality*. New York: Basic Books, 1954.
- Fiddes, Paul S. *Past Event and Present Salvation : The Christian Idea of Atonement*. Louisville, KY.: Westminster/J. Knox Press, 1989.
- Finlan, Stephen. *The Background and Content of Paul's Cultic Atonement Metaphors*. Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004.
- — —. *Problems with Atonement : The Origins of, and Controversy About, the Atonement Doctrine*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2005.
- Fitzmyer, Joseph A. *Romans : A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1993.
- Flood, Derek. *Healing the Gospel : A Radical Vision for Grace, Justice, and the Cross*. Eugene, Or.: Cascade Books, 2012.
- Francis, Lesley J. , and Jeff Astley. "The Quest for the Psychological Jesus: Influences of Personality on Images of Jesus." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 16, no. 3 (1997): 247-59.
- Girard, Rene. *Violence and the Sacred*. Translated by Patrick Gregory. London: Continuum, 2005.

- Glaser, Barney G. *Doing Grounded Theory: Issues and Discussions*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1998.
- — —. *Emergence Vs Forcing: Basics of Grounded Theory Analysis*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1992.
- — —. *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the Methodology of Grounded Theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press, 1978.
- Glaser, Barney G., and Anselm L. Strauss. *Awareness of Dying*. Chicago: Aldine, 1965.
- — —. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. Chicago: Aldine Pub. Co., 1967.
- — —. *Time for Dying*. Chicago, Ill.: Aldine, 1968.
- Goldingay, John. *The Message of Isaiah 40-55: A Literary-Theological Commentary*. London; New York: T & T Clark, 2005.
- Goodspeed, Edgar J. "Some Greek Notes." *Journal of Biblical Literature* 73 (1954): 84-92.
- Gorman Jr., Frank H. *Ideology of Ritual Space, Time and Status in the Priestly Theology*. Jso91. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Pr, 1990.
- Green, Joel B. "Kaleidoscopic View." In *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James K. Eddy Paul R. Beilby, 157-85. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006.
- . "Must We Imagine the Atonement in Penal Substitutionary Terms? Questions, Caveats and a Plea." In *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 153-71. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Green, Joel B., and Mark D. Baker. *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament & Contemporary Contexts*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- Grogan, Geoffrey. "The Atonement in the New Testament." In *The Atonement Debate: Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 83-95. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Grudem, Wayne A. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. Leicester, England; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Inter-Varsity Press ; Zondervan Pub. House, 1994.
- Gundry-Volf, J.M. "Expiation, Propitiation, Mercy Seat." In *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Ralph P. Martin Gerald F. Hawthorne, and Daniel G Reid, 279-84. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Gunton, Colin E. *The Actuality of Atonement a Study of Metaphor, Rationality, and the Christian Tradition*. London; New York: T & T Clark, 2003.
- Hall, Todd, and Beth Brokaw. "The Relationship of Spiritual Maturity to Level of Object Relations Development and God Image." *Pastoral Psychology* 43, no. 6 (1995): 373-91.
- Hall, Todd W. "Christian Spirituality and Mental Health: A Relational Spirituality Paradigm for Empirical Research." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 23, no. 1 (2004): 66-81.
- — —. "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part I: The Emergence of Two Relational Traditions." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35, no. 1 (2007): 14-28.
- — —. "Psychoanalysis, Attachment, and Spirituality Part II: The Spiritual Stories We Live By." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 35, no. 1 (2007): 29-42.

- Hall, Todd W., Beth Fletcher Brokaw, Keith J. Edwards, and Patricia L. Pike. "An Empirical Exploration of Psychoanalysis and Religion: Spiritual Maturity and Object Relations Development." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 37, no. 2 (1998): 303-13.
- Hall, Wendy A., and Peter Callery. "Enhancing the Rigor of Grounded Theory: Incorporating Reflexivity and Relationality." *Qualitative Health Research* 11 (2001): 257-72.
- Halstead, Philip J. "Forgiveness Matters: A Psychometric and Qualitative Study of the Development of a Forgiveness Course for New Zealand Churchgoing Adults Exploring Their Parental Relationships." Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, University of Auckland, 2009.
- Hanson, A.T. *The Wrath of the Lamb*. London: S.P.C.K., 1957.
- Hardin, Michael. "Out of the Fog: New Horizons for Atonement Theory." In *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 54-76. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Heath, Helen, and Sarah Cowley. "Developing a Grounded Theory Approach: A Comparison of Glaser and Strauss." *International Journal of Nursing Studies* 41, no. 2 (2004): 141-50.
- Heider, George C. "Atonement and the Gospels." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 2, no. 2 (2008): 259-73.
- Heim, S. Mark. *Saved from Sacrifice : A Theology of the Cross*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008.
- Helminiak, Daniel A. "A Scientific Spirituality: The Interface of Psychology and Theology." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 6, no. 1 (1996): 1-19.
- Hengel, Martin. *The Atonement : The Origins of the Doctrine in the New Testament*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981.
- Hermisson, Hans-Jurgen. "The Fourth Servant Song in the Context of Second Isaiah." In *The Suffering Servant : Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, 16-47. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004.
- Hilborn, David. "Atonement, Evangelicalism and the Evangelical Alliance: The Present Debate in Context." In *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 15-33. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Hoffman, Marie T. *Toward Mutual Recognition : Relational Psychoanalysis and the Christian Narrative*. New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Hofius, Otfried. "The Fourth Servant Song in the New Testament Letters." In *The Suffering Servant : Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, 163-88. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004.
- Holmes, Stephen R. "Ransomed, Healed, Restored, Forgiven." In *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 267-92. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Hood, Jane C. "Orthodoxy Vs. Power: The Defining Traits of Grounded Theory." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 151-64. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- Howe, David. *Attachment across the Lifecourse : A Brief Introduction*. Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

- Howe, Leroy T. *The Image of God: A Theology for Pastoral Care and Counseling*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.
- Janowski, Bernd. "He Bore Our Sins: Isaiah 53 and the Drama of Taking Another's Place." In *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, 48-74. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004.
- Jersak, Brad. "Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ." In *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 18-53. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Jersak, Brad, and Michael Hardin. *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Johnson, Junius. *Patristic and Medieval Atonement Theory: A Guide to Research*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.
- Johnson, Luke Timothy. *Reading Romans: A Literary and Theological Commentary*. Macon, Ga.: Smyth & Helwys Pub., 2001.
- Johnston, R.K. "The Four Spiritual Laws." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 425. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Jones, Stanton L., and Richard E. Butman. *Modern Psychotherapies: A Comprehensive Christian Appraisal*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1991.
- Karen, Robert. *Becoming Attached: First Relationships and How They Shape Our Capacity to Love*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Kelle, Udo. "The Development of Categories: Different Approaches in Grounded Theory." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 191-213. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- — —. "'Emergence' Vs. 'Forcing' of Empirical Data? A Crucial Problem of 'Grounded Theory' Reconsidered." *Forum: Qualitative Social Research* 6, no. 2 (2005).
- Kendall, J. "Axial Coding and the Grounded Theory Controversy." *Western Journal of Nursing Research* 21 (1999): 743-57.
- Kirkpatrick, Lee. "An Attachment-Theory Approach Psychology of Religion." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 2, no. 1 (1992): 3-28.
- — —. "An Attachment-Theory Approach to the Psychology of Religion." In *The Psychology of Religion: Theoretical Approaches*, ed. B Spilka and D.N. McIntosh. Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997.
- Kirkpatrick, Lee A., and Phillip R. Shaver. "Attachment Theory and Religion: Childhood Attachments, Religious Beliefs, and Conversion." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29, no. 3 (1990): 315-34.
- Klooster, F.H. "Elect, Election." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 348-9. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Koch, Klaus. "Some Considerations on the Translation of *Kapporet* in the Septuagint." In *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom*, ed. David P. Wright, David Noel Freedman and Avi Hurvitz, 65-76. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1995.
- Krause, Neal, Deborah Bruce, R. David Hayward, and Cynthia Woolever. "Gratitude to God, Self-Rated Health, and Depressive Symptoms." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53, no. 2 (2014): 341-55.
- Kushner, Harold S. *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*. London: Pan Books, 1981.

- Lambert, Nathaniel M., Margaret S. Clark, Jared Durtschi, Frank D. Fincham, and Steven M. Graham. "Benefits of Expressing Gratitude: Expressing Gratitude to a Partner Changes One's View of the Relationship." *Psychological Science* 21, no. 4 (2010): 574-80.
- Larsen, Timothy. "Defining and Locating Evangelicalism." In *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier, 1-14. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Lawrence, Richard T. "Measuring the Image of God: The God Inventory and the God Image Scales." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 25, no. 2 (1997): 214-26.
- Leclerc, Thomas L. *Yahweh Is Exalted in Justice : Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001.
- Lempert, Lora Bex. "Asking Questions of the Data: Memo Writing in the Grounded Theory Tradition." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 245-64. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- Levine, Baruch A. *In the Presence of the Lord : A Study of Cult and Some Cultic Terms in Ancient Israel*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1974.
- Lewis, Gordon R. "Attributes of God." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 451-9. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Lewis, Gordon R., and Bruce A. Demarest. *Integrative Theology, Vol. 2*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publ. House, 1990.
- MacArthur, John. *The Murder of Jesus : A Study of How Jesus Died*. Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 2000.
- Main, M., and J. Solomon. "Procedures for Identifying Infants as Disorganised/Disoriented During the Ainsworth Strange Situation." In *Attachment in the Preschool Years : Theory, Research, and Intervention*, ed. Mark T. Greenberg, Dante Cicchetti and E. Mark Cummings, 193-246. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Mann, Alan. *Atonement for a 'Sinless' Society : Engaging with an Emerging Culture*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005.
- Marshall, Christopher D. *Beyond Retribution : A New Testament Vision for Justice, Crime, and Punishment*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001.
- . *Kingdom Come : The Kingdom of God in the Teaching of Jesus*. Auckland, N.Z.: BCNZ, 1990.
- Marshall, I. Howard. *Aspects of the Atonement : Cross and Resurrection in the Reconciling of God and Humanity*. London; Colorado Springs, CO: Paternoster, 2007.
- . *Luke : Historian and Theologian*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974.
- . "The Theology of the Atonement." In *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 49-68. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- McCallin, Antoinette. "Grappling with the Literature in a Grounded Theory Study." *Contemporary Nurse* 15, no. 1-2 (2003): 61-9.
- McDargh, John. *Psychoanalytic Object Relations Theory and the Study of Religion : On Faith and the Imaging of God*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1983.
- McGhee, Gerry, Glenn R. Marland, and Jacqueline Atkinson. "Grounded Theory Research: Literature Reviewing and Reflexivity." *Journal of Advanced Nursing* 60, no. 3 (2007): 334-42.
- McGrath, Alister E. *Christian Theology : An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1994.
- McKnight, Scot. *A Community Called Atonement*. Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2007.
- . *Jesus and His Death : Historiography, the Historical Jesus, and Atonement Theory*. Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2005.



- Meeks, Wayne A. *The Origins of Christian Morality: The First Two Centuries*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.
- Mertens, Herman-Emiel. *Not the Cross, but the Crucified: An Essay in Soteriology*. Louvain; [Grand Rapids, Mich.]: Peeters Press ; Eerdmans, 1992.
- Milbank, John. *Being Reconciled: Ontology and Pardon*. London: Routledge, 2003.
- Milgrom, Jacob. *Leviticus 1-16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.
- Miller, S.I., and F. Marcel. "How Does Grounded Theory Explain?" *Qualitative Health Research* 9 (1999): 538-51.
- Miller, William R., and Carl E. Thoresen. "Spirituality, Religion, and Health. An Emerging Research Field." *The American psychologist* 58, no. 1 (2003): 24-35.
- Mills, Jane, Ann Bonner, and Karen Francis. "The Development of Constructivist Grounded Theory." *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 5, no. 1 (2006): 1-10.
- Miner, Maureen. "The Impact of Child-Parent Attachment, Attachment to God and Religious Orientation on Psychological Adjustment." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 37, no. 2 (2009): 114.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.
- Moon, G.W. and J. Fantuzzo. "An Integration: Christian Maturity and Positive Mental Health." *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 2, no. 1 (1983): 27-37.
- Moriarty, Glendon, Louis Hoffman, and Christopher Grimes. "Understanding the God Image through Attachment Theory: Theory, Research, and Practice." *Journal of Spirituality in Mental Health* 9, no. 2 (2006): 43-56.
- Morris, Leon. *The Atonement, Its Meaning and Significance*. Downers Grove, Ill., USA: Inter-Varsity Press, 1983.
- — —. "Theories of the Atonement." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 100-2. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Morse, Janice M. "Sampling in Grounded Theory." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 229-44. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- — —. "Tussles, Tensions, and Resolutions." In *Developing Grounded Theory: The Second Generation*, ed. Janice M. Morse, Phyllis Noerager Stern, Juliet M. Corbin, Barbara Bowers, Kathy Charmaz and Adele E. Clarke, 13-23. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009.
- Moule, C.F.D. "Punishment and Retribution: Delimiting Their Scope in N.T. Thought." In *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 252-67. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Murphy, Nancey. "Theological Resources for Integration." In *Why Psychology Needs Theology: A Radical-Reformation Perspective*, ed. Alvin C. Dueck and Cameron Lee, 28-52. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2005.
- Nelson, C. Ellis. "Formation of a God Representation." *Religious Education* 91, no. 1 (1996): 22-39.
- Nicole, Roger R., Charles E. Hill, and James A. Frank. *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives: Essays in Honor of Roger Nicole*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004.

- Northey, Wayne. "The Cross: God's Peace Work toward a Restorative Peacemaking Understanding of the Atonement." In *Stricken by God?: Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 356-77. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Packer, J. I. "Anger." In *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner, 381-83. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- — —. "The Atonement in the Life of the Christian." In *The Glory of the Atonement: Biblical, Historical & Practical Perspectives*, ed. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James, 409-25. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Packer, J. I., and Mark Dever. *In My Place Condemned He Stood: Celebrating the Glory of the Atonement*. Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2008.
- Pannenberg, Wolfhart. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1988.
- Peirce, Charles S. *The Collected Papers of Charles S. Peirce*. 8 vols. Vol. 5, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935.
- Peters, Ted. *Sin: Radical Evil in Soul and Society*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1994.
- Pierard, R.V. "Evangelicalism." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 379-82. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Potter, J., and A. Hepburn. "Eight Challenges for Interview Researchers." In *Handbook of Interview Research*, ed. J. Gubrium, J. Holstein, A. Marvasti and K. McKinney, 541-70. Los Angeles: Sage, 2012.
- Pruyser, Paul W. "Anxiety, Guilt and Shame in the Atonement." In *Religion in Psychodynamic Perspective: The Contributions of Paul W. Pruyser*, ed. H. Newton Malony and Bernard Spilka. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- — —. *A Dynamic Psychology of Religion*. New York: Harper & Row, 1968.
- Rae, Murray. "Texts in Context: Scripture and the Divine Economy." *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 1, no. 1 (2007): 1-21.
- Rashdall, Hastings. *The Idea of Atonement in Christian Theology*. London: Macmillan, 1919.
- Ray, Darby Kathleen. *Deceiving the Devil: Atonement, Abuse, and Ransom*. Cleveland, Ohio: Pilgrim Press, 1998.
- Reichenbach, Bruce R. "Healing View." In *The Nature of the Atonement: Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, 117-42. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006.
- Reichertz, Jo. "Abduction: The Logic of Discovery of Grounded Theory." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 214-28. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- Reid, Duncan, and Mark Worthing. *Sin and Salvation*. Hindmarsh, SA: Australian Theological Forum Press, 2003.
- Rimbach, James A. "Model Servant/Servant Model." *Concordia Journal* 10, no. 1 (1984): 12-20.
- Rizzuto, Ana-Maria. *The Birth of the Living God: A Psychoanalytic Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.
- Robinson, W.C. "Wrath of God." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, 1196. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1984.
- Sanders, John. *Atonement and Violence: A Theological Conversation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.
- Schatzman, L. "Dimensional Analysis: Notes on an Alternative Approach to the Grounding of Theory in Qualitative Research." In *Social Organisation and Social Process: Essays in Honor of Anslem Strauss*, ed. D.R. Maines, 303-14. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1991.

- Schatzman, L., and A.L. Strauss. *Field Research*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1973.
- Schleiermacher, Friedrich. *The Christian Faith*. New York: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Schmiechen, Peter. *Saving Power : Theories of Atonement and Forms of the Church*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2005.
- Schnelle, Udo. *The Human Condition : Anthropology in the Teachings of Jesus, Paul, and John*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.
- Schreiner, Thomas R. "Penal Substitution View." In *The Nature of the Atonement : Four Views*, ed. James K. Beilby and Paul R. Eddy, 67-98. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2006.
- Schwartz, Regina M. *The Curse of Cain : The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997.
- Sloan, Richard P., and Emilia Bagiella. "Claims About Religious Involvement and Health Outcomes." *Annals of behavioral medicine: a publication of the Society of Behavioral Medicine* 24, no. 1 (2002): 14-21.
- Snow, David A., and R. Machalek. "The Convert as a Social Type." In *Sociological Theory, 1983*, edited by Randall Collins. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1983.
- Spieckermann, Hermann. "The Conception and Prehistory of the Idea of Vicarious Suffering in the Old Testament." In *The Suffering Servant : Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, ed. Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, 1-15. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2004.
- St. Clair, Michael. *Human Relationships and the Experience of God : Object Relations and Religion*. New York: Paulist Press, 1994.
- Stackhouse, John G. "Evangelical Theology Should Be Evangelical." In *Evangelical Futures : A Conversation on Theological Method*, ed. John G. Stackhouse, 39-60. Nottingham: Apollos, 2001.
- Stern, Phyllis Noerager. "On Solid Ground: Essential Properties for Growing Grounded Theory." In *The Sage Handbook of Grounded Theory*, ed. Anthony Bryant and Kathy Charmaz, 114-26. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2007.
- Stern, Phyllis Noerager, and Caroline Porr. *Essentials of Accessible Grounded Theory*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2011.
- Stott, John R. W. *The Cross of Christ*. Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1986.
- Strauss, Anselm L. *Qualitative Analysis for Social Scientists*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987.
- Strauss, Anselm L., and Juliet M. Corbin. *Basics of Qualitative Research : Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1990.
- — —. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Newbury Park: Sage, 1998.
- Stuckey, Tom. *The Wrath of God Satisfied? : Atonement in an Age of Violence*. Eugene, Or.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2012.
- Taylor, Charles. *Sources of the Self : The Making of the Modern Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989.
- Taylor, Nicholas H. "The Social Nature of Conversion in the Early Christian World." In *Modelling Early Christianity : Social-Scientific Studies of the New Testament in Its Context*, ed. Philip F. Esler. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Tesch, R. *Qualitative Research: Analysis Types and Software*. London: Falmer Press, 1990.

- Tidball, Derek. "Penal Substitution: A Pastoral Apologetic." In *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 345-60. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Tidball, Derek, David Hilborn, and Justin Thacker, eds. *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Titscher, S., M. Meyer, E. Vetter, and Ruth Wodak. "Methods of Text and Discourse Analysis." In *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2000.
- Tloczynski, Joseph, Christa Knoll and Andrew Fitch. "The Relationship among Spirituality, Religious Ideology, and Personality." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 25, no. 2 (1997): 208-13.
- Torrance, James B. "Covenant of Contract?: A Study of the Theological Background of Worship in Seventeenth-Century Scotland." *Scottish Journal of Theology* 23, no. 1 (1970): 51-76.
- Torrance, Thomas F., and Robert T. Walker. *Atonement : The Person and Work of Christ*. Downers Grove, Ill.: Inter-Varsity Press, 2009.
- Travis, Stephen H. "The Doctrine of the Atonement: Popular Evangelicalism and the Bible." *Catalyst* 1 (1995): 1-3.
- Volf, Miroslav. "Forgiveness, Reconciliation, and Justice." In *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 268-87. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Walker, D., and F. Myrick. "Grounded Theory: An Exploration of Process and Procedure." *Qual Health Res* 16, no. 4 (Apr 2006): 547-59.
- Weaver, J. Denny. *The Nonviolent Atonement*. Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001.
- Weaver, J. Denny. "The Nonviolent Atonement: Human Violence, Discipleship and God." In *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 316-55. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- — —. "Response to Hans Boersma." In *Atonement and Violence : A Theological Conversation*, ed. John Sanders. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006.
- Weinfeld, Moshe. "'Justice and Righteousness' - the Expression and Its Meaning." In *Justice and Righteousness : Biblical Themes and Their Influence*, ed. Henning Graf Reventlow and Yair Hoffman, 228-46. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992.
- — —. *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East*. Jerusalem; Minneapolis (Minn.): The Magnes Press/The Hebrew Univ Fortress Press., 2000.
- Williams, Garry. "Penal Substitution: A Response to Recent Criticisms." In *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 172-91. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Wink, Walter. *Engaging the Powers : Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992.
- Winnicott, D. W. *Playing and Reality*. New York: Basic Books, 1971.
- Wong-McDonald, Ana, and Richard L. Gorsuch. "A Multivariate Theory of God Concept, Religious Motivation, Locus of Control, Coping, and Spiritual Well-Being." *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 32, no. 4 (2004): 318.

- Wright, Christopher J.H. "Atonement in the Old Testament." In *The Atonement Debate : Papers from the London Symposium on the Theology of Atonement*, ed. Derek Tidball, David Hilborn and Justin Thacker, 69-82. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2008.
- Wright, N. T. *Jesus and the Victory of God*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.
- — —. *Surprised by Hope : Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church*. New York: HarperOne, 2008.
- Wright, N.T. "The Reasons for Jesus' Crucifixion." In *Stricken by God? : Nonviolent Identification and the Victory of Christ*, ed. Brad Jersak and Michael Hardin, 78-149. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2007.
- Yanos, P.K., and K. Hopper. "On 'False, Collusive Objectification': Becoming Attuned to Self-Censorship, Performance and Interviewer Biases in Qualitative Interviewing." *International Journal of Social Research Methodology* 11, no. 3 (2008): 229-37.
- Young-Eisendrath, Polly, and Demaris Wehr. "The Fallacy of Individualism and Reasonable Violence against Women." In *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse : A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn, 117-38. New York, N.Y.: Pilgrim Press, 1989.

## APPENDIX A: Church Advertisement



### **THE IMPACT OF THE ATONEMENT ON PERSONAL WELL-BEING: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY**

Participants are sought for a doctoral research study currently being carried out through the University of Otago's Department of Theology and Religion.

As Christians, we believe that Jesus died for us – that He gave his life so that we might be reconciled to God, redeemed from old ways of living and restored to right relationships with God and others. Atonement theology explains how it is that Jesus' death sets us right with God. There are several different beliefs, or ways of thinking, about how this restoration works in the lives of believers – this study aims to examine the relationship between the way Christians think about the atonement and the way they experience life. This research needs participants who are prepared to have a conversation about how they understand the work of Jesus on the cross, and also their past and current experiences of life. The interview process will follow an open-ended format, so after some initial questions, the conversation will generally follow the lead of each participant's experiences.

You need to be over 18 years of age and able to commit one hour of time for a recorded interview at a location of your choice. There may also be a further one hour interview requested as a follow-up at a later stage of the research.

If you would like to participate in this study, or would like further information, please contact:

Contact Details: Principal Researcher:

Jeremy Sievers  
31 Halifax Ave  
Epsom  
Ph. 522-9444 Mob. 027-242-7895  
Email. jsievers@ihug.co.nz

**This project has been reviewed and approved by the Department of Theology and Religion  
(University of Otago)**

## APPENDIX B: University of Otago Ethics Application



### UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO HUMAN ETHICS COMMITTEE APPLICATION FORM: CATEGORY B (Departmental Approval)

1. **University of Otago staff member responsible for project:**  
Prof. Murray Rae
2. **Department**  
Theology and Religion
3. **Contact details of staff member responsible:**  
murray.rae@otago.ac.nz
4. **Title of project:** The impact of the atonement on personal well-being: A grounded theory study.
5. **Indicate type of project and names of other investigators and students:**

**Staff Research** ☐ **Names**

**Student Research** ☒ **Names**

*Level of Study (e.g. PhD, Masters, Hons)*

**External Research/  
Collaboration** ☐ **Names**   
*Institute/Company*

**6. When will recruitment and data collection commence?**

August 2014

**When will data collection be completed?**

December 2015

**7. Brief description in lay terms of the aim of the project, and outline of the research questions that will be answered (approx. 200 words):**

The aim of this project is to explore the impact that different beliefs around the atonement have on believer's well-being. Christian believers all hold the belief in some form that Jesus' death and resurrection has achieved something of value for them, usually described in terms of being reconciled or 'made right' with God, redeemed from the darkness of harmful ways of living, and receiving the gift of eternal life with God after death. However, there are many different views around how the cross is understood to be efficacious and the central contention of this thesis is that the particular views held by a believer will in some way impact on their emotional and psychological well-being. Because this project will gather data through open-ended interviews, we cannot specify all the research questions that will be asked. However, the interviews will start with open-ended questions such as;

- 1) How would you describe what Jesus has done for you?
- 2) In what ways does this (or these things) affect the way you live?
- 3) Could you tell me something about what your needs are in life?
- 4) Can you talk about the way(s) Jesus meets those needs?
- 5) How do you understand the expression "Jesus died for our sins"?
- 6) What difference does this make in your everyday life?

**8. Brief description of the method.**

Participants will be recruited from a range of Auckland churches through advertising in church newsletters. They will need to be over 18 years of age, but there will be no other exclusion criteria. Participants will take part in a one hour recorded interview with the possibility of a follow-up interview of a further one hour. The methodology for the project will follow Grounded Theory principles, where the number of subjects is flexible due to interviews continuing until 'theoretical saturation' is reached. However, it is expected that at least 30 participants will be interviewed, with the transcripts of these interviews providing the main data for the project.

**9. Disclose and discuss any potential problems:**

Two main potential problems exist:

- 1) It is possible that the line of questioning may trigger deep-seated and unresolved emotions, for example guilt, shame or anxieties. As this is not a therapeutic endeavour, it would be wrong to attempt to address such deep concerns in this interview setting. This risk is mitigated by two main factors. Firstly, the interviewer is a trained counsellor, sensitive to potential issues emerging and aware of the need to keep participants psychologically safe. Secondly, participants will all be made aware of their rights to avoid particular questions if they wish, or to withdraw from the interview process at any stage.



In the unlikely event of a participant becoming upset and needing follow-up assistance, the interviewer will work with the participant to connect them with appropriate support at the church they are affiliated to, or, if this is inappropriate, to find alternative avenues of support and/or counselling.

- 2) It is also possible, though even less likely, that due to the nature of the questions and conversation, a participant may chose to disclose information about previous or current illegal activities. Because there is no ethical code of confidentiality governing these interviews, and because NZ law requires mandatory reporting of some situations, for example, child abuse, interviews will commence with a recorded statement to this effect, so that participants are aware that if they chose to disclose illegal activity the interviewer may have to report it. In the event that the interviewer were to detect that some disclosure was imminent or had occurred, the interview would be stopped immediately and the participant reminded of the interviewer's duty to report.

**\*Applicant's Signature:** .....

**Name (please print):** .....

**Date:** .....

*\*The signatory should be the staff member detailed at Question 1.*

***ACTION TAKEN***

☐

Approved by HOD

☐

Approved by Departmental Ethics Committee

☐

Referred to UO Human Ethics Committee

**Signature of \*\*Head of Department:** .....

**Name of HOD (please print):** .....

**Date:** .....

**\*\*Where the Head of Department is also the Applicant, then an appropriate senior staff member must sign on behalf of the Department or School.**

**Departmental approval:** *I have read this application and believe it to be valid research and ethically sound. I approve the research design. The research proposed in this application is compatible with the University of Otago policies and I give my approval and consent for the application to be forwarded to the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee (to be reported to the next meeting).*

**IMPORTANT NOTE:** As soon as this proposal has been considered and approved at departmental level, the completed form, together with copies of any Information Sheet, Consent Form, recruitment advertisement for participants, and survey or questionnaire should be forwarded to the Manager, Academic Committees or the Academic Committees Administrator, Academic Committees, Rooms G22, G23 or G24, Ground Floor, Clocktower Building, or scanned and emailed to either [gary.witte@otago.ac.nz](mailto:gary.witte@otago.ac.nz) or [jane.hinkley@otago.ac.nz](mailto:jane.hinkley@otago.ac.nz)

## **APPENDIX C: Participant Information Sheet**

### **THE IMPACT OF THE ATONEMENT ON PERSONAL WELL-BEING: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY**

#### **INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS**



Thank you for showing an interest in this project. Please read this information sheet carefully before deciding whether or not to participate. If you decide to participate we thank you. If you decide not to take part there will be no disadvantage to you and we thank you for considering our request.

#### **What is the Aim of the Project?**

This project is being undertaken as the PhD research of Jeremy Sievers, a student at the University of Otago's Department of Theology and Religion.

The Bible teaches us that Jesus Christ lived, died and was resurrected – that he was crucified 'for us' and that those who believe in him will receive eternal life. Jesus himself taught that those who believe in him will "know the truth and the truth will set you free" (John 8:23) and that believers "might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

People think about the life, death and resurrection of Jesus in different ways and also experience this knowledge in different ways. People also experience the ups and downs of life, its challenges and triumphs, in a variety of ways and this is true for those who are believers, just as its true for those who are not.

This project is interested in hearing Christian people's life stories – firstly, their understanding of what Jesus has achieved through the cross (the atonement) and secondly, their stories about how this has impacted on their experience of life.

#### **What Types of Participants are being sought?**

Participants are currently being sought from a range of Christian churches across Auckland. An advertisement outlining the project has been sent to a number of churches with contact details of the principal researcher. Participants therefore are to make the first contact to express interest in participating.

Participants should be over the age of 18 and need to be prepared to allocate a maximum of two hours to an interview process (an initial one hour interview with a possible follow-up interview of a further one hour.)

It is envisaged that the project will involve interviewing approximately 30 participants.

### **What will Participants be asked to do?**

Should you agree to take part in this project, you will be asked to participate in a one hour interview with the researcher, Jeremy Sievers, at a location and time of your choice. This interview will be recorded for the purpose of transcribing. You may be asked to participate in a follow-up interview of the same duration should clarification of any points be needed as the research proceeds. This would also be recorded.

Following interviews, you will be provided with a transcribed copy of the interview so that if you wish, you can check that the content accurately describes what you wish to say.

We do not expect that this interview process will raise any matters that pose any risk of harm to participants. If, however, you do find that any question raises an issue of personal concern or you become upset for any reason, you are fully entitled to stop the interview at any stage. You are also entitled to request that any particular material arising from your interview not be used for the research.

If you experience distress in any way, the researcher will undertake to establish follow-up support with pastoral staff from your church, or to connect you with alternative counselling support should you so wish.

Please be aware that you may decide not to take part in the project, or to withdraw from the project at any stage without any disadvantage to yourself.

### **What Data or Information will be collected and what use will be made of it?**

You will be asked to supply some basic personal information, namely: Age, gender, ethnicity you identify with, denomination you affiliate with, the length of time you have been a Christian.

The interview(s) you participate in will be audio recorded and these recordings transcribed. These transcriptions form the basis of the data that will be used in the research.

Transcription will be completed by Jeremy Sievers. In the event that an outside transcription service is used, that service will not be provided with any names or identifying features of the participants. On transcription, all participant's names will be changed to pseudonyms. The only person who will have access to the information linking original recordings to transcribed interviews will be Jeremy Sievers.

If at any stage you wish to withdraw from the project, you have the right to do so and your interview recordings and transcribed materials will be destroyed at that point.

At the completion of the research the original recordings and transcriptions, together with participant's personal details will be destroyed. The data collected from the interview process will be securely stored in such a way that only those mentioned below will be able to gain access to it. This data obtained as a result of the research will be retained for 5 years in secure storage, or possibly indefinitely.

The results of this project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve your anonymity.

This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes questions about your understanding of the Atonement, that is, what you believe about the saving work of Christ through His death and resurrection. Questions will also ask you about your experience of life and your experience of well-being. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops. Consequently, although the Department of Theology and Religion is aware of the general areas to be explored in the interview, the Committee has not been able to review the precise questions to be used.

In the event that the line of questioning does develop in such a way that you feel hesitant or uncomfortable you are reminded of your right to decline to answer any particular question(s).

### **Can Participants change their mind and withdraw from the project?**

You may withdraw from participation in the project at any time and without any disadvantage to yourself. However, it will be likely that it will be difficult to remove your specific data from the research after December 2015 due to timeframe for completion of the project.

### **What if Participants have any Questions?**

If you have any questions about our project, either now or in the future, please feel free to contact either:-

Jeremy Sievers  
Department of Theology and Religion  
Contact Telephone: 027-242-7895  
Email: jsievers@ihug.co.nz

and

Professor Murray Rae  
Department of Theology and Religion  
University Telephone: 03-479-5393  
Email: murray.rae@otago.ac.nz

This study has been approved by the Department stated above. However, if you have any concerns about the ethical conduct of the research you may contact the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee through the Human Ethics Committee Administrator (ph 03-479-8256). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated and you will be informed of the outcome.

**APPENDIX D: Participant Consent Form****THE IMPACT OF THE ATONEMENT ON PERSONAL  
WELL-BEING: A GROUNDED THEORY STUDY****CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS**

I have read the Information Sheet concerning this project and understand what it is about. All my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I am free to request further information at any stage.

I know that:-

1. My participation in the project is entirely voluntary;
2. I am free to withdraw from the project at any time without any disadvantage;
3. Personal identifying information, including audio recordings of my interview(s) will be destroyed at the conclusion of the project but any raw data on which the results of the project depend will be retained in secure storage for at least five years.
4. This project involves an open-questioning technique. The general line of questioning includes questions about my understanding of the Atonement, that is, what I believe about the saving work of Christ through His death and resurrection. Questions will also ask me about my experience of life and my experience of well-being. The precise nature of the questions which will be asked have not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the interview develops and that in the event that the line of questioning develops in such a way that I feel hesitant or uncomfortable I may decline to answer any particular question(s) and/or may withdraw from the project without any disadvantage of any kind.
5. I understand that if I experience any discomfort, or if worrying issues are raised by the questions I am asked that I will have the right to discontinue the interview process, and that I will be assisted to seek help either from my church pastoral staff or from an external counsellor.
6. The results of the project may be published and will be available in the University of Otago Library (Dunedin, New Zealand) but every attempt will be made to preserve my anonymity.

I agree to take part in this project.

.....  
(Signature of participant)

.....  
(Date)

.....  
(Printed Name)

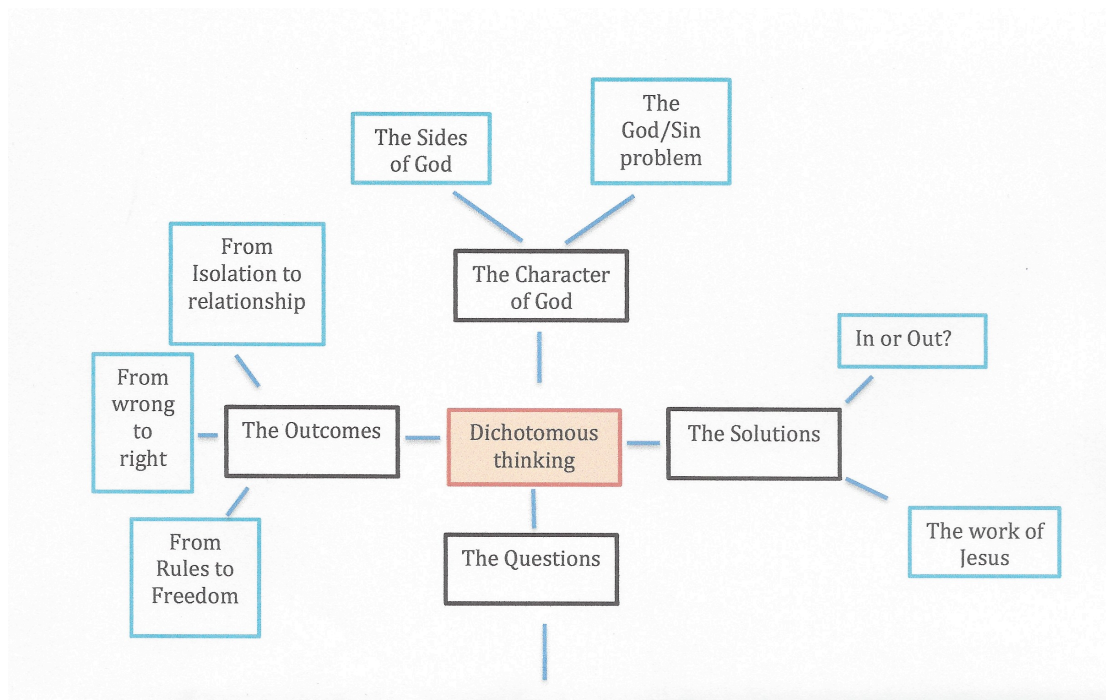
**APPENDIX E: Summary of Focused Coding : Comparison of First Ten Interviews**

Participant 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	Character of God	Character of God	The Holiness of God	Character of God	God's Action		The need for justice	Character of God	Character of God
The human state	The need for Jesus		The human state (naturally bad)	Naturally bad		The human state (in the wrong)	The human state- positive!	The human state	
Christ's action		What Jesus accomplishes	What Jesus accomplishes	Getting right with God: Christ's action	Function of the cross	Jesus' action	The cross is love: God's mission	The work of the cross	Jesus' action: Paying the penalty
Results of the atonement	The good stuff		The good stuff		Outcome of faith: freedom with God				My fortunate state
	Decision time		Bad consequences	In/Out					Escape from...
	An outward focus	A way to live	The life of faith	Trusting and hoping					
						A relationship free from rules	Looking to Jesus		Relationship

Participant 1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Early experience	Early influences: Old beliefs still present		Early influences	Stuffing it in	Childhood influences	Engrained beliefs		Firm foundations	Early influences
		Personal faith			A choice to believe				
			The challenges	Expectations still		Growing up	Finding healing	Submitting to his rule over my life	"Shoulds"
Rejecting the myth	Something more?	A life well lived	Ongoing struggles	Present suffering	The harsh realities	Not smooth sailing	Tough times		
The right language				Models of understanding					And now for something completely new
					Impact of the Old Testament	What about grace?		Sacrifice	
Being hugged into life	Faith changing	Living on the edge			Jesus and Holy Spirit	Not so different after all	The importance of others	A lot to worry about	



## APPENDIX F: Developing Categories



1. Changing beliefs: Most participants have had their beliefs engrained from childhood. Many had 'not thought' about the questions that came up in interview. Some expressed thoughts about their ideas changing over time while others did not. What factors might contribute to the changing of long-held beliefs for these people or are childhood beliefs and attitudes so deeply fixed that real change is unlikely? Are these engrained childhood beliefs perhaps more powerful than the adult expressed beliefs in terms of impact on experience of life?
2. The 'In Between' space. Is there any space in between the black and white extremes of these dichotomies? Is it possible for people to have beliefs that encompass some grey space in between or some uncertainty? As one participant put it, is there room for fresh understanding without losing sight of 'good solid teaching'?
3. The presence of God. In a paradigm of 'In/Out' or saved/not saved, or separated/in relationship, there remain a number of questions regarding what might be in between these experiences. Given that God is present to people pre-confession of faith, does he somehow become more present post-confession of faith? What of the participants (two) who knowingly spent times in their lives actively in rebellion against God, but in these times were 'in relationship' with him to the extent that they continued to argue with God, hurl abuse at God and so forth. What about those who express that they pray to God but have no theological understanding of the Christian God and have not 'prayed a sinner's prayer' as many participant's expressed as central in their lives? Are there possibilities of other expressions of coming in to the faith?

4. On a related topic, Jesus' death takes away the barriers to relationship with God...does his death release God so that God is free to enter into relationship, or does it release humans to have that relationship?
5. Another related topic: many participants express the view that God cannot 'look on sin' or have anything to do with sinners. Is this true? Where does this idea come from? What about God's response to Adam and Eve's sin in the garden? What of other OT characters who God seeks out in their sin? What about the parable of the prodigal and so forth...
6. Does God really have two 'sides' to his character? Is the caricature of an angry, judging and holy OT God really descriptive of God's nature portrayed in the OT and does God therefore somehow change character in the NT. Where does Jesus as son fit into this? What of the grace of God described in the OT? Why does that seem to be so overlooked? Is this really a projection onto God of how we feel about the good and bad parts of human nature? If God the father is harsh and judging, Jesus is loving and self-sacrificing – what about the Holy Spirit's part in the Trinity or is this a complete misrepresentation of the Trinity?
7. God's grace: On another related topic - If it is only by God's grace that sinners are redeemed/saved, then where does the cross fit in the picture? Is God's grace somehow greater because of the cross? Is God's grace released by the work of Jesus on the cross...if so, how was God not able to be so gracious before? What could possibly have been constraining God's grace?
8. The contrast between expressions of faith/trust/joy/relationship and expressions of the ongoing difficulties of life. How do participants express understanding of what is happening when there is a gap between what they hope for and what they experience. All participants spoke of relationship with God that sustains them. They also spoke of 'going through hard times,' 'hurling abuse at God,' 'struggling,' 'God not answering' and so forth. The common theme is acceptance that 'God has a better plan' and of needing to conform their will more closely to God's. How does the cross and the death of Jesus speak to this?
9. What does it do to children who are confronted with ideas of heaven/hell, inclusion/exclusion, making a decision for Christ at ages as young as 4, 6, 8, 9 as with some participants? What of the participant deeply affected as a child by a movie showing the bloodiness of the crucifixion, or the participant who was sung to sleep as a child with "There is a green hill far away.....I do believe it was for us he hung and suffered there" and then would cry herself to sleep believing it was her fault Jesus died.

### **Dichotomy 1: The 'Problem' – the character of God**

- a. **The sides of God:** some ideas expressed -  
 Contrast between the 'harsh' and 'gentle' 'sides' of God (2/14)  
 Love and justice – the two sides of God (3)  
 Being separated from God's presence by his holiness (3, 4/1)

Seeing God's wrath all the way through the OT (3)  
 Jesus – the only acceptable sacrifice to satisfy God's holiness (7/4)  
 The need for punishment to satisfy God's holiness and justice (2/4, 2/5, 4/1, 4/2, 5/3, 10/6)  
 God being so holy we sinners would burn in his presence (3)

Memos: "Wrathful OT God" "The sides of God" "The arrival of Grace"

- b. **The God/Sin problem:** some ideas expressed –  
 Being separated from God by sin (2/3, 3, 4/3, 4/8, 5/3, 6/11)  
 Being filthy without Jesus' death (10/1)  
 'Naturally bad' – the human state (5/3)  
 Growing up with 'everyone has sinned' so 'I am in the wrong' (7/4, 7/2)  
 Receiving an eternity in hell (10/12) a place of unimaginable torment (10/13)  
 God being unable to be in relationship with sin (4/3)  
 God being unable to let sin go unpunished (10/5)  
 Being holy and unreachable by humans (4/3)  
 The gulf between holiness and humanity (7/10)  
 The cross as the bridge to the chasm (3)  
 Jesus being punished in our place, where we deserved the punishment (4/3, 10/7)

Memos: "Isolated from God" "God's abhorrence of sin" "

## Dichotomy 2: The Solutions

- a. **In or Out?:** some ideas expressed –  
 Making a decision (2/3, 5/1)  
 Coming to the Lord at age 8 (4/2)  
 Being intentional as a Christian (6/1)  
 Praying the sinner's prayer at age 8 or 9 (6/4)  
 Becoming a Christian (7/3)

Memos: "Stuffing it IN" "In or Out?" "Being intentional as a Christian"  
 "Making a definite decision"

- b. **The work of Jesus:** some ideas expressed –  
 Jesus pays the price that we owe (2/4, 5/3, 7/10, 10/2)  
 Being reconciled to God (3)  
 Being adopted (3)  
 Jesus as the ultimate sacrifice (6/8, 10/4)  
 Taking my sin on himself (4/3, 7/1, 10/5)  
 Taking on the sin of the world (7/4)  
 Buying us back from slavery (5/7)  
 The cross shows us God's love (4/6)  
 Seeing God's presence with us in Jesus' suffering (5/6)  
 The transaction is complete (10/1)

Memos: "Paying the Fine/Paying the Price"

### Dichotomy 3: The Outcomes

- a. **Isolation to Relationship:** some ideas expressed -  
 Restoring relationship with God (2/1, 3, 7/3, 10/16)  
 Finding relationship with God overwhelms rights and wrong (7/3)  
 Having a personal rather than distant relationship (6/11)  
 But still a tension of course with the realities of life:  
 Struggling to believe God accepted me (4/5)  
 Still being naturally critical (5/11)  
 Expressions of unworthiness (4), depression (1, 4), struggles in life (1,3,4,7)

Memos: "Impacts the way we view life"

- b. **Rules to Freedom:** some ideas expressed –  
 Freedom from: guilt and condemnation (4/1), worry (6/6, 7/1), rules (7/14, 6/6)  
 Gaining: Security (2/9), Purpose (2/10), Peace (5/1), Forgiveness (5/12, 6/16)  
 And yet, again in contrast:  
 Struggling with legalism (4/5)  
 Understanding my brokenness (5/11)  
 Feeling inadequate (5/13)  
 Chronic pain and struggling with God in the years of pain (6/19, 6/20)  
 Needing to stop thinking I can earn God's approval (10/11)  
 Feeling in the right relationship by constantly approaching God (10/18)

Memos: "Freedom" "Being free from rules"

- c. **From Wrong to Right:** some ideas expressed –  
 Recognising own 'wrongness' and the gift of 'rightness' (5/11)  
 Feeling not good enough (4/15)  
 Being made acceptable to God (4/1)  
 Avoiding eternal death (2/6, 4/8) and hell (5/13)  
 Good future in eternity (4/1)

Memos: "Death or resurrection"

**APPENDIX G: Conceptual properties** (“theoretical,” “abstract,” “intangible”)

14 Apr 16

(From Interviews 1-9)

From these conceptual properties, categories ‘emerge.’

	Source in Code headings:
1. “Using language to describe God”	1: The right language
<b>Concepts related to God:</b>	
2. God having two sides – being holy/just and therefore requiring punishment but also loving on the other hand	2: Character of God 3: Character of God 5: God being just and good 10 God’s character - punishing
2a. The holy God ‘watches and judges’ and needs our confession before he forgives	7: The Human state – in the wrong
2b. God is angry with the sin of broken relationship and acts through the cross to restore relationship	8: God’s mission through the cross
<b>Concepts related to Jesus:</b>	
3. Being self-sacrificing	1: Christ’s action 3: What Jesus did 5: Christ’s action
3a. Taking our sin on himself so that we are made acceptable to God	4: What Jesus accomplishes 10: Jesus’ action – paying the price
3b. Sacrificial imagery relating Jesus’ death to the OT sacrificial system as a means of approaching God	6: God’s action 7: Jesus’ action 9: Sacrifice
<b>Concepts related to the human state</b>	
4. Separating ourselves from God	1: The Human State
5. Separation from God because of his holiness and human sin	3: Character of God 4: God is Holy 7: The human state – in the wrong 10: The human state
5a. Needing punishment because of our sin	4: The Human state 4: Bad consequences

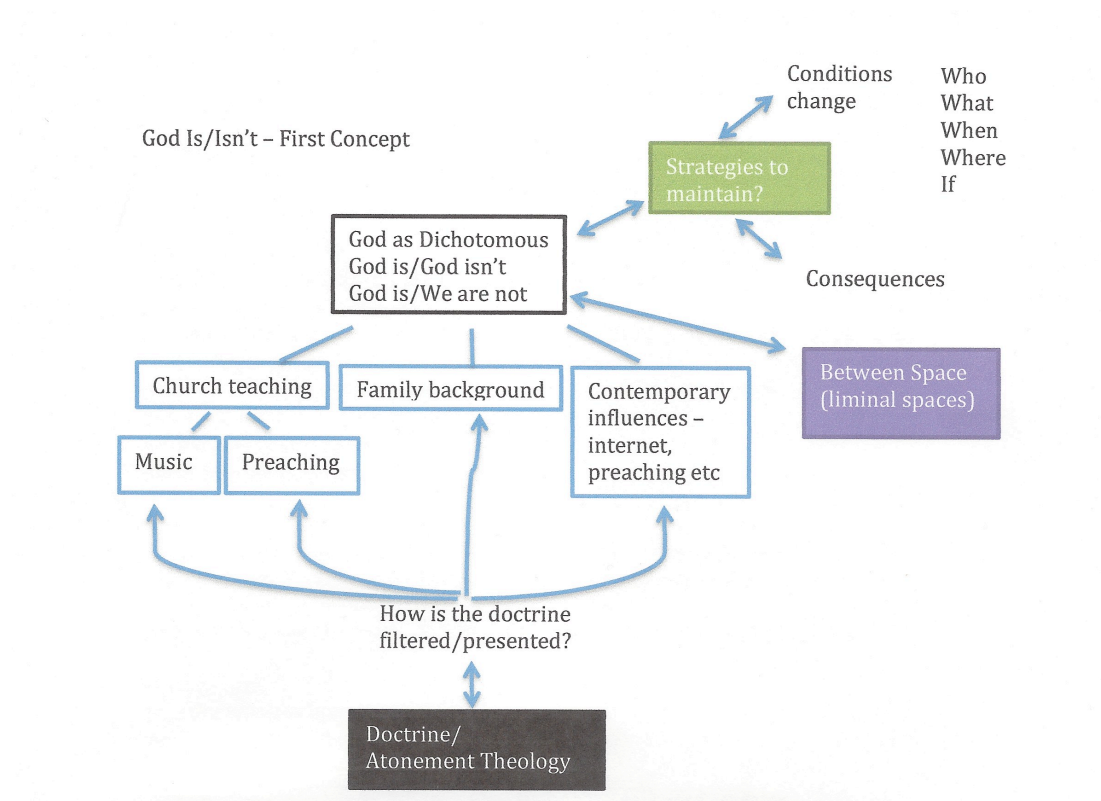
5b. Deserving eternity without God - Hell	10: The human state
5c. Being either 'In' or 'Out' - heaven or hell depending on the decision each person makes	5: IN/OUT 10: The human state
5d. The human state of sin is 'brokenness,' 'wrongness' and containing no goodness.	5: Naturally Bad 7: The human state – in the wrong 9: The human state
5e. Seeing humans as made in God's image and needing relationship	8: The human state
6. Making a decision to respond to Christ (#6 "being intentional as a Christian")	1: Early experience 2: Decision time 3: Early influences 6: A choice to believe 9: Firm foundations
<b>Concepts related to what Christ's death achieves:</b>	
7. Being at-one with God and others –relationship with God is now possible and God speaks personally and directly to people	1: The result of the atonement 3: What Jesus did 6: Outcome of faith – conversation with God 7: The relationship 8: Looking to Jesus 10: Relationship
7a. The cross is where we can take our hurt, anger and pain, where we are safe to do this to receive healing	8: Finding her healing
7b. The substitutionary death of Jesus shows God's love because it shows the lengths God will go to to deal with human sin	10: God's character
8. Paying the price of blood that God required/paying the fine	2: The need for Jesus 5: Christ's action 7: Jesus' action 10: Jesus' action – paying the price
8a. Making peace with God – 'the bridge between man and God over the chasm of sin'.	3: What Jesus did 6: Function of the cross 7: Jesus' action 9: The work of the cross
8b. The cross shows God's love – Jesus dies as a	8: The cross is love

<p>consequence of our actions but the cross shows God's forgiveness – 'reaching the point past anger where you can forgive.'</p> <p>9. Being comfortable as a forgiven believer: saved, secure, loved and accepted.</p> <p>9a. Receiving freedom from past regrets and freedom from the rigidity of religious rules</p> <p>9b. The transaction of Jesus' death takes me from me a place of total depravity and makes me righteous in God's sight. I receive Christ's righteousness for my salvation</p> <p>10. Experiencing God's love through people</p> <p>11. Developing new understandings – living 'In between' old messages and new hopes</p> <p>12. Seeing a contrast between the distant God represented in the OT and the relational God present in the NT</p> <p><b>Concepts about how to live:</b></p> <p>13. Needing to live obediently and behave accordingly, dying to self</p> <p>13a. Finding a tension between accepting the grace of God and feeling the pressure to be deserving, good enough and perform. Needing to confess sins so that God will forgive.</p> <p>13b. Feeling a pressure around sharing faith with others, learning that this should be an outflowing of friendship rather than the need to 'convert'</p>	<p>8: God's mission through the cross</p> <p>2: The good stuff 4: The good stuff 5: Getting right with God</p> <p>6: Outcome of faith: Freedom 7: The Effects</p> <p>10: My fortunate state</p> <p>1: Being hugged into life 5: Finding God in friendships 6: The harsh realities 8: The importance of others &amp; The human state</p> <p>1: Rejecting the myth 2: Old beliefs still present 2: Outward focus 2: Early influences</p> <p>6: Outcome of faith: Conversation with God 7: What about grace?</p> <p>3: Way to live 4: The life of faith 5: Expectations still 9: The work of the cross 10: Shoulds</p> <p>4: On-going struggles 4: The challenges 5: Getting right with God</p> <p>7: Not so different after all</p>
---	---

14. Gaining a wider view – more than a single point of view as a result of study	3: Training and study
15. Being ‘in and out’ of faith – but even the ‘out’ is in relationship to God	3: Personal faith 6: A choice to believe 9: Time adrift
16. The power of early childhood experiences in forming a life of faith with strong opinions, especially from strongly opinionated parents	4: Early influences 5: Stuffing it in 6: Childhood influences 7: Engrained beliefs 8: Tough times 9: Firm foundations 10: Early influences
17. God is in control of everything, despite how it might look at points in my life – there’s a ‘bigger plan’ than I can see which makes sense of daily struggles	4: The life of faith 5: Trusting and hoping 6: The harsh realities 7: Growing up 8: The cross is love
17a. God ‘micro-manages’, causing hard events to teach us and ‘working all things for good’. Our part is to submit to his will and let go of our control so that he can.	5: Trusting and hoping & Expectations still. 7: Growing up 9: Submitting to his rule
17b. A struggle around why God needed to use the cross when he could have stopped what happened and forgiven us anyway. Being free to question God or be angry with him.	8: Questions of God and 8: God?
17c. Struggles with anxiety, depression and self-doubt being in contrast with the spoken message of God’s continual presence and ‘never being disappointed’	9: A lot to worry about & 9: Submitting to his rule



## APPENDIX H: God is/God isn't: First Concept



Another concept? – the question around trusting God for everything in life, wondering about his 'provision', finding that the things you ask him for don't work out or get provided and having to come to grips with this by 'trusting' that 'he's got a better plan' and that 'he provides for me' (For example see 5/13&14 or 6/20/5)

**God Is/Isn't** (the character of God – but there is also the God IS/we are not issue)  
In fact, its not so much that God Isn't – Isn't what? Its more that there are multiple 'black and white' traits that seem to be in opposition, eg, righteousness & grace...

Black and white views of God

Reconciled to God or not

God's holiness vs our sin and our need for punishment

Righteousness (& justice) side of God and the love (& grace) side

Unrighteous humans isolated from God's righteousness

Human isolation from God because of sin – God can't 'look on' sin and therefore he can't look on us

Human state is broken, sinful, deserving punishment

Innately in rebellion

2/3/7: So, when I was a child, I mean, I remember there was a little book called 'Bridge to life' (OK) I don't know if you know it? (No, I don't recall that one!) No? And it was a really, a simple little evangelical tool, and it just, just, you know, it showed the Gospel story and it had like the two sides of, you know (Oh, yes) with the big chasm in the middle (The big cliffs on each side) yeah and the cross bridged the gap between God on one side (I do remember!) Yeah? So that, I mean to mean that's kind of classic,

classic kind of....a kind of black and white kind way of viewing relationship with God.. (Yeah) you know, do we, are we reconciled to God or not? (Yes!) Have we had our sins forgiven or not? And there's this or that, and there's no kind of....(Yeah) there's kind of no journey that people, you know, there's not a lot of journey perhaps...that's not quite.... Its very, yeah, its very black and white...its very kind of....are you a Christian, are you not a Christian?

2/4/11 I suppose so.....God's holiness required that, that there was a punishment for that sin, so, yeah, you could say that's, that it was a cost wasn't it?

3/1/4 "...so, you know, implicit in my understanding of the Christian message is the fact that Christ died once you know, and um, that brought us to God, you know, that made peace with God, it fulfilled the righteousness side of God, you know..."

3/6/3 "Yes! The idea that there's two sides to God right, there's God's love and his righteousness, or justice (Mmm...) and unfortunately God has both sides you know, unfortunately for us, because he is perfect, he is pure, there's no shadow of change with him, whereas with us we're fickle, you know, finite beings ...but if you take the principle that there is no ...that there is no change to its, to its ultimate, then God is....holy, you know...he is totally pure and....good, but with that good comes the idea of righteousness, and if we are unrighteous we cannot come into God's presence..."

4/1/6 "so we've all fallen short of God's standard...and God's holiness demands that there's justice, there's punishment for that, which means that we experience separation from him....we lose, we lose the relationship with him that we were created for, so...what Jesus has done then...and we couldn't....there's nothing we could do to make up for that."

4/3/7 "God is perfect, um and he ...he um....oh I hate to say the word can't, but I'm going to...so he can't be in relationship with sin...(Yup...) so, so our sin has destroyed that, um, his holiness is that he's perfect, he's unique, he's one of a kind, um and he's unreachable for us as humans (Mmm) you know, apart from through Christ..."

10/4/2 "...but I think it was Jesus' perfect life, ah made him, qualified him to be an acceptable and a supreme sacrifice...again I'm thinking of Hebrews when I think of that (Yes) and ah, Jesus, I believe that Jesus was punished for that, I believe that God (Sure) punished Jesus for that, ah in terms of um, the wrath that should've been directed at me, did get directed at Christ, and so that effectively paid the penalty..."

10/5/3 "but I do believe that Jesus was punished, I think ah, the Father is righteous, he's holy, and its uncharacteristic, its out of character for God....he can't let sin go unpunished, um I know that from the character, ah the righteousness of God that I read about in the Bible (Yup) ah is that you know, one demands another, you know, sin demands death, there must be something that's paid, and I guess the fact that it has to be paid, or the wages of sin is death, um, there's only one person who can do that, and that's the judge that's, that's God...he is the one who judges, so to me those things add up to saying that if there's only one person who can deal with the problem of sin, only one person who's going to judge sin, who is going to punish sin, and I know that sin has to be punished ah in order for righteousness to be made available,

then that's God himself, if Jesus therefore took the place, or my place on the cross (Yeah) then the only punishment must have been Jesus who took it and God who delivered it because he's the holy God who deals with sin and does punish it..."

10/8/3 " , but he was separated from God I believe for a....I don't know how long or I don't know how that works but I believe that that punishment includes...he'd never been separated from God in his life (Yeah) um the mystery of the Trinity and yet ...somehow, somehow God took on sin, ah you know and there's a huge mystery there for whatever period that was in terms of the punishment, God bore sin and ah that's...that's amazing...."

### **God Is/We are not**

3/6/1 "I mean, Christians treat this so blandly I suppose, but we can never come into the presence of God, because God is holy and we're not, right?"

3/8/2 "Well only because he is holy.....you could look at another illustration, you could say that if we came into God's presence we would be burnt up because we are not holy, right? (Yeah...) We wouldn't be able to stand in his presence quite literally...the fact that we can is because Christ, in Christ we have the ability to stand, you know because he can stand in God's presence....."

5/3/6 "just from my understanding of humanity, um, and sin...in the spiritual sense we can't be in God's presence (Mmm...) broken as we are (Yeah...) because we deserve judgement (Yeah...) um, and if God's just, which he is, um, like anyone who comes before a judge if they've done wrong he's not a good judge if he just gives them a free pass (Sure...) So as a just judge I understand God needing um, the price to be paid...there has to be a cost because we're innately in rebellion against him...so the cross is his way of paying the price himself in (Right....) in real physical terms through Jesus' death (Yeah....) and....paying the price that we owe, so that he can have a relationship with us again (Yeah...) So that's kind of, in a legal sense...."

5/10/14 "Um...the forgiveness side of things is probably one of the most significant because genetically and otherwise I don't think grace is a big natural feature.... (Sure) So...the deeper the understanding of how I've been forgiven goes, the better equipped I am to treat others with grace (Yeah...) So without the forgiveness element, the understanding that I'm broken and that somebody else has stepped into my shoes quite literally to fix me....um, yeah...it gives me kind of the vocabulary and the motivation around grace and restoration that I don't think I would've had naturally..."

7/2/3 "I just always assumed that I was in the wrong, I've always assumed that with God I've always been in the wrong until I, um, confessed and had God, invited God into my life... I don't know where that came from, maybe its just from my background, um..."

7/6/1 The God not being able to cope with sin issue...leading to the idea of God abandoning Jesus... "his disciples departing and leaving him alone and he actually had to be separated from God because he was carrying the sin of the world and that would've been a very lonely thing to go through, I mean physically it would've been

painful, terrible, but also being incredibly lonely when the people who are meant to be your friends abandon you and even God abandoning you”

7/10/3” Um, the...gaining of his people, they can come back to him (Yup....because Jesus has died?) Yeah, because there was that divide, God is holy and someone needs to pay the price so that the divide could be, so that that gap, the divide could be gotten rid of, just like at the Temple when the (The curtain was ...) the curtain torn from top to bottom, its no longer that holy of holies place (Yeah) everyone...

J: So is God not capable of stepping across that divide?

7: Um, the fact is, God is holy and would...Holiness there is...God, there's a....things work a certain way and you can't take something holy and make it dirty...it needs to remain pure (Yeah) and so....so, Jesus had to go and make things right, he had to pick it up dirty before things could get holy again...it sounds.....? It doesn't sound right but....”

9/1/8 “There were three jars of water (Yeah) One was, one had a lot of the sediment settled on the half...half of the jar, so it was clear on the top, and then there was one pure water like that (indicates a glass of water on the table) and then the third one was just constant black...and so they talked about our hearts (Mmm) being like that....and sin, um, and they mentioned Christ could make us like that (indicates the glass of water) and that's what I wanted....(Wow!) and, and when they, when they....the one that had half sediment and half water, they shook it and said sometimes its all black and then it settles...and so I guess it's a bit like Paul describes the double man (Yeah) ...so I wanted to be like that (Yeah) and my heart was pumping when they gave the invitation...I thought 'woah I'm up there!' I had no idea what it all meant, really (Yeah) but I definitely felt conviction (Yeah) and I definitely heard...heard an invitation in my heart and in my intellect, and responded to it...yup....and haven't, haven't been disappointed with that decision...at all...”

10/1/2 “I understand it in terms of paying the penalty for what I deserved so its um, you know the things, and I can't approach God...I just, I understand that...I couldn't approach him (yup) without it I'm just ...filthy, so ah, his death means that that is washed away, that's gone and in ...not in its place, that's the wrong term to use, but its not only that but I get Christ's righteousness...”

10/2/4 “....through his death on the cross and my acceptance of that there's a new person born, ah you know that Jesus talks to Nicodemus about it's the new person....but I'm allowed to draw near to God now and worship him with a clear conscience like it talks about in Hebrews, I can...I can worship him whereas before naturally in a fallen way I couldn't do that.”

### **Exceptions to God Is/Isn't**

3/6/3 An interesting insight that he doesn't seem to develop – even in the OT they could come into God's presence – so how is that? “...and if we are unrighteous we cannot come into God's presence ...um, except that we can, and even in the Old Testament they could...so there is this idea of grace, or God making allowance...but I suppose, if you wanted to be mathematical, there's got to have an equals sign in it...so

therefore Christ is the equals sign (Mmm...) you know he makes up for our shortfall..."

5/6/5 "...because its all through the Bible, and any culture can relate to the idea of, of having laws that you have to live by and there being consequences if you don't (Yeah, yeah) and the whole society's in agreement that this is the...you know..." An interesting comment from this participant that assumes that all cultures operate with a retributive model for justice – which is perhaps an arguable point and raises the question as to whether there are other cultural models (which there are!) that have more healing-oriented approaches to justice.

6/7/7 Participant doesn't identify at all with ideas of God as Is/isn't .. "...he handed that over to us when he left (Yeah...) saying 'Go and tell the world of the good news' and its not like 'Go and give them a list of rules that Christianity is,' ...'Go and be kind to them, tell them in your actions, go and.....there are a lot of people who are like well I'm a Christian that's why I beat people over the head with a Bible and tell them they should cos then they wont go to hell and you're like.....really inspiring..."

8/1/4 "so it took me a long time to figure out, to think through why...why would God send his son to die on a cross when he's all powerful and he could have just forgiven us anyway..."

### **Church Teaching – Music**

2/8/5 "The old rugged cross, so despised by the world, is that? That's how that one goes isn't it? (OK) Some good old classic hymns..."

### **Church Teaching – Preaching**

7/9/3 "Definitely sermons preached to me, um, it would be songs as well, um, just the idea of, I don't know there's that song, 'He took the cross and thought of me above all,' so, there are heaps of worship songs that have demonstrated or captured um the sacrifice that Jesus paid on my behalf, um, so yeah..."

### **Church Teaching – Communion**

2/2/3 Yeah I guess, I guess, yeah perhaps its perhaps just a change of mentality from, from the way that, um, you know, I guess from my growing up times, (Mmm) where the, where the, say even the communion...you know, having communion in a church service, um, is such a critical point, and focusing on the blood of Christ (Yeah) and, and all of those things, and each, each week we'd be kind of taken to those things, as, as the, you know, the crucial?

2/6/7 "Yeah it is, it is probably....and also I think the communion service, or whatever you like to call it, on a Sunday morning (Yeah) Um, each week we would have communion, and...my Dad was an elder all through."

### **Family Background**

2/6/7 "Sure, well I think the Bible has been something that's been really esteemed in our home growing up. (Yup) So each night we'd have a Bible reading, as small children we'd have a Bible story, um probably from the age of 7, I was the youngest, we sat around the table every night (Gosh...) and read a section of the Bible, and we'd

pray as a family, so that's um, so that would certainly be, you know, the Bible was esteemed in our home growing up."

5/1/6 Father introduced the relationship between sin and hell at age 3-4.

5/7/7 "Yeah my parents always...we read scripture every day, and then at some point we started doing the Bible in a year thing, so we went through...didn't matter what the book was we read it, so, and then when I was pretty little, memorized bits of the shorter Catechism....the children's Catechism, which is the shorter shorter catechism (Yeah, yeah...) So, um, a lot of those concepts that could take years to figure out (yeah, yeah, yeah...) by the time I was six or seven you know, sin and justification, sanctification, I had a sentence that described it and it didn't always mean that much at the time (Yeah yeah) but it meant when words were thrown out there in teaching...."

5/8/9 "The younger you are the easier it is...(That's amazing!) Little kids, you could stuff chapters into them no problem, seriously... you know my parents, especially my Dad trying to like make sure that I had the framework in my head (Wow!) Yeah..."

6/4/3 Very strongly opinionated father for this participant. She went away from her faith between 18-21, despite his strictness... "you know so I was kind of actually researching it for my own understanding not for (Yeah) "Dad's always said this and this is the type of church I go to and that's the sermon they told me so I guess that's kind of it" Yeah!"

6/14/3 "I belonged to a family that went to church because we believed Jesus died on the cross for our sins..."

7/3/1 "I don't know growing up I always, um, always, I grew up with this mentality of there's a right and a wrong thing and that God was out there judging and watching you and I was always threatened about, 'Oh if you're a bad girl...you know....um you don't want to be in the bad books with God,' and so maybe that was part of growing up and me always thinking, oh yeah um...I always have this default position of, 'I'm a sinner...'"

## Contemporary Influences

### How is the doctrine filtered/presented?

2/7/3 "So I do think that the blood of Christ, that term the blood of Christ (Yeah) is one of those 'tick boxes' as a child, that I remember that being a critical in, you know, as Mum and Dad, I'd hear Mum and Dad talk about (Yeah) things, or how the church service had gone or whatever, and that blood of Christ was a 'tick box' that was quite critical to be mentioned? (OK) yeah, yeah, so quite a, yeah quite a strong thing I think...(later)... But if you, like I guess it links back to like Passover...(Yeah) Passover kind of talk (Ok, yeah) but you know, the lamb, the blood of the lamb, the shedding of the blood, (Yeah, yeah) that was quite a, that was quite an important um...."

5/1/5 "J: You remember making a decision... 5: I remember the process....my Dad's rather blunt about the connection between sin and hell (Right!) and raised it when I was very young, when I knew enough (OK...) Yeah, yeah....and I had plenty to think about, yeah...I remember praying very young...."

6/14/7 This participant spoke about 'making a decision' to become a Christian at age 8, praying the 'sinner's prayer' and signing the piece of paper to acknowledge this decision somehow. Perhaps this is a filtering of an approach to the cross that majors on personal sin and the need for 'salvation' to escape hell and so forth... "The sinner's prayer, you know, I'd gone through that and so this is, we're talking the 80's, early 90's which is when (Yeah, yeah) the thing was little pieces of paper that you signed and the sinner's prayer and.....(Cool) as an 8 year old there's only so much of it you can really understand, so yeah...."

### Strategies to Maintain Is/Isn't

2/5/4 Jesus has paid the penalty of sin on our behalf. That price has been paid...but do we still deserve punishment? : "Do we deserve it?..... I think we do still, I think we would... you could say we still deserve it....(Yeah)....um, but God's provided a way for us to...avoid that punishment"

4/6/2 "Because the cross is just the ultimate demonstration of God's love for us, um, you know....I mean that just took tremendous love you know, and that just proves that its...you know if I'm ever doubting, you know cos circumstances happen in life and you can doubt God's love...just look to the cross, you know...what he did there like I cannot doubt that he loves me, that he's on my side... (Yeah...) You know....yeah, so that's....and that he did it, you know it wasn't like I was a great person....it wasn't you know....the Bible says we were his enemies and he did it for us....he loved us first, so there's really nothing I can do, you know, to stand in the way of that love...."

4/7/3 Have you ever felt that God has let you down? "Not for long...Um, I think at times that I have, I've kind of realized that my expectations were wrong you know....and I've had to kind of...change my thinking, I mean you know there have been times of disappointment but, I think that's part of your growth and your understanding of God, and um, and I know...very confident that he's always been with me you know, so...and I understand that ...you know I can't expect to understand God and have him worked out in this ways and so that's faith, that's yeah....so I've never been disappointed with God for very long anyway. You know you sometimes, you wonder why things happen but...(Yeah, sure...) you know I'm able to trust him that he knows what he's doing...."

5/11/7 "Yeah....so....and looking at you know, culture, other people, my church, or outside....like it's a natural state for things to be broken (Mmm...) and its our responsibility to lay down what we have to do what Christ has done for us...which is great in theory and yet...day by day (5 laughs) I don't know how well I practice that, but its good to have that as a constant check." So the theology of the church teaches the everything is broken/responsibility line which can't be argued and then forms the basis of so much subsequently...?

6/15/1 Is this participant speaking about Is/Isn't when she refers to church pressure.... "so when I came in my 20's it was so cool to actually get real, solid understanding of.. its not just a bunch of verses that people pull out of context to use in a sermon when they're trying to convince me to do something that I'm not comfortable about 'cos I don't understand the context."

### Consequences of Is/Isn't

4/5/5 "Um, yeah its huge for me, understanding that I'm loved by God, I'm his child, and, it, it, I'm still getting to grips with it, you know I'll probably spend my whole life getting to grips with that (4 laughs) but have struggled in the past to really believe that, that God could accept me...to feel like I need to do things (Yeah...) in order to please God in order to make him happy, to make him love me.... You know, and always.... Performance, yeah, I tend towards legalism and you know....and of course I could never do good enough and nothing I ever did felt good enough you know (Yeah...) Um, so yeah its been a long gradual process of learning that I'm completely accepted as his child by his grace (The free gift of grace) Yeah, independent of anything that I do (Mmm...) and that, that he delights in me as his child, and that, you know, that he wants me to enjoy that (Yeah...) That he's given me life to enjoy, joy is a great gift from him and so to, to just experience his joy, to be kind to myself, to not, to reject guilt you know if I have confessed my sin to him I don't need to live in guilt, um so...and I don't need to feel guilty about enjoying myself."

4/6/6 "Um, I look to him for my mental and emotional needs as well, um, for the fruit of the spirit in my life, expecially peace is a big one for me (Mmm...) and joy...and I know that those things come from him and so I trust him for that....I have had some experience with anxiety and depression and have done a lot of work there, and um, so yeah I definitely feel like I...he's the source of my emotional well-being..."

4/8/7 "...and the thought of the consequences, for example for my parents, if they don't believe in Christ you know, that's just horrendous (Mmm...) So, that's very difficult...but I know the story's not over yet you know, and I know that I can trust God to do what's right... Hell....so yeah, I mean.... I don't know what hell is, actually... you know I've kind of been brought up on a bit of fire and brimstone, which is awful, you know I hear other people talk about annihilation..." Participant struggling to make sense of the paradigm of a loving God – she could have different academic understandings of what happens to the 'not faithful dead' but primarily the issue lies with a God who needs to punish...

5/1/5 "J: You remember making a decision... 5: I remember the process....my Dad's rather blunt about the connection between sin and hell (Right!) and raised it when I was very young, when I knew enough (OK...) Yeah, yeah....and I had plenty to think about, yeah...I remember praying very young...."

5/11/5 "Possibly yeah, it definitely gives me humility that I wouldn't have naturally...and you know I'm still not as much of humility as I need but you know....its, yeah....I think grace, grace and love come from that place, um, and I don't think I'm naturally strong in those areas, and my parents as lovely as they are, aren't strong in those areas....so having that understanding is a great counterbalance, to kind of a naturally critical 'how can we fix things, how can we make things better' kind of attitude (Yeah...) that's probably pretty common in my family...(Yeah...) Um, if you're constantly concentrating on what needs fixing, what's wrong, its very easy to...um, kind of ...you're blinkered, you're not looking at what's good and what you need to sacrifice and what you need to, um...yeah, giving up your rights, giving up your comfort, giving up your safety doesn't come naturally (Yeah...) when you're



focused on ...what's wrong, what needs fixing out there, if that makes sense (Yeah, yeah...) Um, whereas coming at things from the perspective that, we have no rights and we have no innate goodness, then its all of grace then you don't hold on to what you have as tightly (Mmm...) because none of it was deserved anyway, and so, there's that recognition that anything that's right about my life, anything that I've got sorted was because that was gifted to me..."

### **Conditions change?**

2/4/7 Subject speaking about the way her beliefs seem to have changed in recent years: "Its not, its not that my fundamental thinking has changed, its just perhaps, kind of, the way it kind of incorporates in my life has just changed in kind of focus (Ok, ok) Yeah, perhaps its subtle, I don't know...."

3/10/3 Participant speaking about how he copes with the possible condemnation of a colourful past: "but I try to have compassion as my, as my kind of main, my main modus of operation (Sure...) and that comes from my understanding, that I'm accepted by God....even a great sinner like myself can be accepted by God, and although I have to continually...uh, you know not let my past drag me down, so that I'm not kind of, so that I don't feel....I mean I do feel....somehow I can hold the fact that in the past I've done some bad things, like you know, taking heroin which nearly killed me....so I do see, uh, that there is a consequence to our actions right (Yeah...) Even now there's still a consequence but that does not hide from the fact that I do see myself acceptable to God right?"

7/3/1 "...and getting to know God I've, I don't see it as black and white any more, and its more God's kind of love and relationship kind of overwhelms this whole idea of right and wrong and yeah... its gone from looking past the right and wrong mentality to seeing the person....am I just going off on there....?"

Participant 7 is moving from an understanding of God that was extremely black and white to a more grace-based comprehension ... but she is largely unable to articulate this understanding. She has the original black and white story 'off pat' but her newer understanding is (7/5/1 "...and I can't explain the details and I can't, I don't think I fully understand it myself, and I think I've tried to pull it apart and understand but maybe I'm not clever enough to understand it or whatever,")

8/8/4 Participant speaking about the cross from a different perspective, not of God is/We are not, but more along the lines of the cross is where God meets us in our suffering: "and I think, relating back to that story that I told you earlier, in a metaphorical sense that's where I got to the point where I was just...had to place myself at the foot of the cross you know I couldn't deal with the hurt and the pain and the anger that I was feeling but I could come to Jesus and know that he had it all sorted out and I definitely remember having that image in my mind of being at the foot of the cross and just finding the safety there and when it was all getting too much ....too much out in the world coming back there in an emotional and metaphorical sense (Yeah...) to the foot of the cross, its just that, God knows what he's doing and I'm here where its safe, and I don't necessarily understand all of the theology behind it but..."

8/11/2 “I see the hurt and the anger from God in sin, in all of the years leading up to the cross and everything that’s happened since then, but I don’t see it so much in the actual cross, in the crucifixion, in the atonement, um, I see that as the forgiveness, the letting go of the anger...I don’t know if that’s helpful or right but you said there were no wrong answers...”

### **The Between Space**

2/5/10 Subject speaking about the theology she believes: “Yeah, so that hasn’t changed, but, yeah, perhaps the way I...think about life, in terms of, you know (Yeah) what that’s supposed to look like has possibly changed a little bit....”

2/12/3 This next quote sounded like it was coming from the new thinking that this participant had referred to, thinking that was less black and white than her upbringing: “...I think that God leads us outside of, the real, like um, I don’t know how to say it, but outside of the real like, feeling like its God talking to us, but, that God, when he lives in us, (Yeah...) that he is living through us, we don’t necessarily need to be thinking about that...(Yeah, yeah) linking that to that, but that God is living in us, and directing us in....making life happen you know...”

2/13/4 Again, this participant speaking in a way that sounded as if she was hoping for more than she had grown up with believing... “I kind of realize that I’m way undervaluing what God offers me, or that my preconceptions of who God is, or what God, or what that relationship is, is....are way under what they actually, I think as we grow a picture, a realistic picture (Yeah, yeah) of God, that perhaps I see it more from my perspective, that I don’t have as great an understanding of, of the freedom that God allows us.... You know? (Yeah!) That he offers us...and I guess those are the kind of things that I hope that as life continues on that, you know...that I’ll grasp a little more, and that will turn, and that will be a reality of...”

2/14/3 Again, “So the holiness of God would’ve been something that was, I would perceive as being greatly emphasized....um, yeah, so, there’s kind of holiness, love....um, what does the love of God look like, I think, you know perhaps love is something that kind of changed a little in my thinking....um yeah.....there’s kind of the harshness of God versus the softer side of God, and how does that actually come together in reality....”

3/9/3 Participant speaks at length about not adhering to what he has experienced as Christian judgmentalism and compartmentalizing – he instead wants to experience all that life has to offer and be widely accepting of different ways of being. This comes out of his own difficult past experiences: “I guess you could say that I try to focus on the idea of compassion, I try to focus on the idea that my actions must speak louder than my words (Yeah....you were talking about James...) So, I’m often, I’m often picked out in a group as the non-Christian (J laughs...) and when people know that I’m a Christian they often get a fright, that they thought that I was, you know, definitely of the rogue category you know...so in other words I don’t, I don’t try and put a framework up ahead of me, where I’m a Christian don’t swear, I’m a Christian...you know.....I don’t do that you see, I just kind of try to make friends with people, without that, without that tag.”

5/12/3 Is this an example of In Between Space...? Participant responds to the question, "Do you feel forgiven?" by saying, "Um, like I said, I struggled with that for however many nights when I was four (Yeah...) and I've had very few moments since then when I've had any struggle with that (Awesome...) which could be a bad thing as well, because there are times when I'm sure I have needed to come before God and confess, stubbornness and selfishness and stuff and I've just completely missed the opportunity, so, um I've probably given myself too many free passes, but on the other hand the assurance that he gave me then has stuck with me (Yeah!) and...and I've seen close family members and others struggle with that and for some reason I don't...." It has layers of IS/Isn't – for example the 'I've probably given myself too many free passes' comment, but it also seems in some ways more relaxed under the surface than these words might imply...

6/3/5 Not really the Between Space in terms of the character of God, but included here because the participant was fascinating in terms of the way she was dealing with God whilst trying to disprove him... "So, the funny thing is during all of that time ...I know I was trying to prove God didn't exist, or kind of trying to live the way everyone else does cos they, they don't believe God exists....I was like "How do you guys do this?" But there was always a niggle and a discomfort cos I was like ...and it was always when I was catching a plane and think if this plane crashes I'm going to hell, not in a ...or I'm not going to heaven or I don't know where I'm going to end up or...and it was just a gut feeling of 'this is not...this doesn't actually align with how I want to live ...' but you just sort of go, "No, no, don't listen to that go and have fun with everyone else" you know and so it was probably about...it started when I was around 21 and I remember praying to God, strangely having conversation and going 'I need an out, from my relationship and from the situation I'm in cos I don't want to be like this for ever.'"

6/6/5 Participant was definitely not in the category of those painting God as Is/Isn't. She had a very different understanding of his character, perhaps based on her 'time away' from faith...? "It almost....it almost sounds horrible to say, but it just, it makes kind of worrying and regretting about all of that....I don't have to do that...(?) It kind of makes, how do I word it...without sounding horrible, its almost like its not.....its almost like its not a massive deal for me, cos I've known about it my whole life, so I'm not suddenly in my mid 20's going 'Oh my gosh some dude went through this traumatic thing so that I could....' I'd always known that, and so it just um....for me it, I mean when you look at it as an event....amazing that God would send his son, there are parts of it that seem foreign to me cos I'm like 'God is out there and in me but then he's in Jesus' ..... for me I do believe in Jesus therefore I do believe that he died on the cross....that's all I have to do, I don't have to kind of investigate it and really deeply understand it I'm like, that's an amazing thing that God's done for me that allows me to live the life he's created me to live....without me getting stuck in rules and things that ...(Yeah...) to pay him back for all the bad I've done in my life, or will do in my life you know (Yeah...) So probably, so for me him dying on the cross means freedom..."

6/15/5 Participant showing an openness to the entire Biblical narrative and its message rather than specific interpretations of the cross or ideas about a black and white God... "but other than that its almost for me the amazingness of God and the

whole story is not just the cross...its like that's a definite key point (Yeah) for a book mark in the Bible, but its all the other things along the way ... So its kind of for me its how all of that stuff (Yeah...) ties together with the significant event of Jesus dying on the cross, its not...I don't see that as the only thing... or the...."

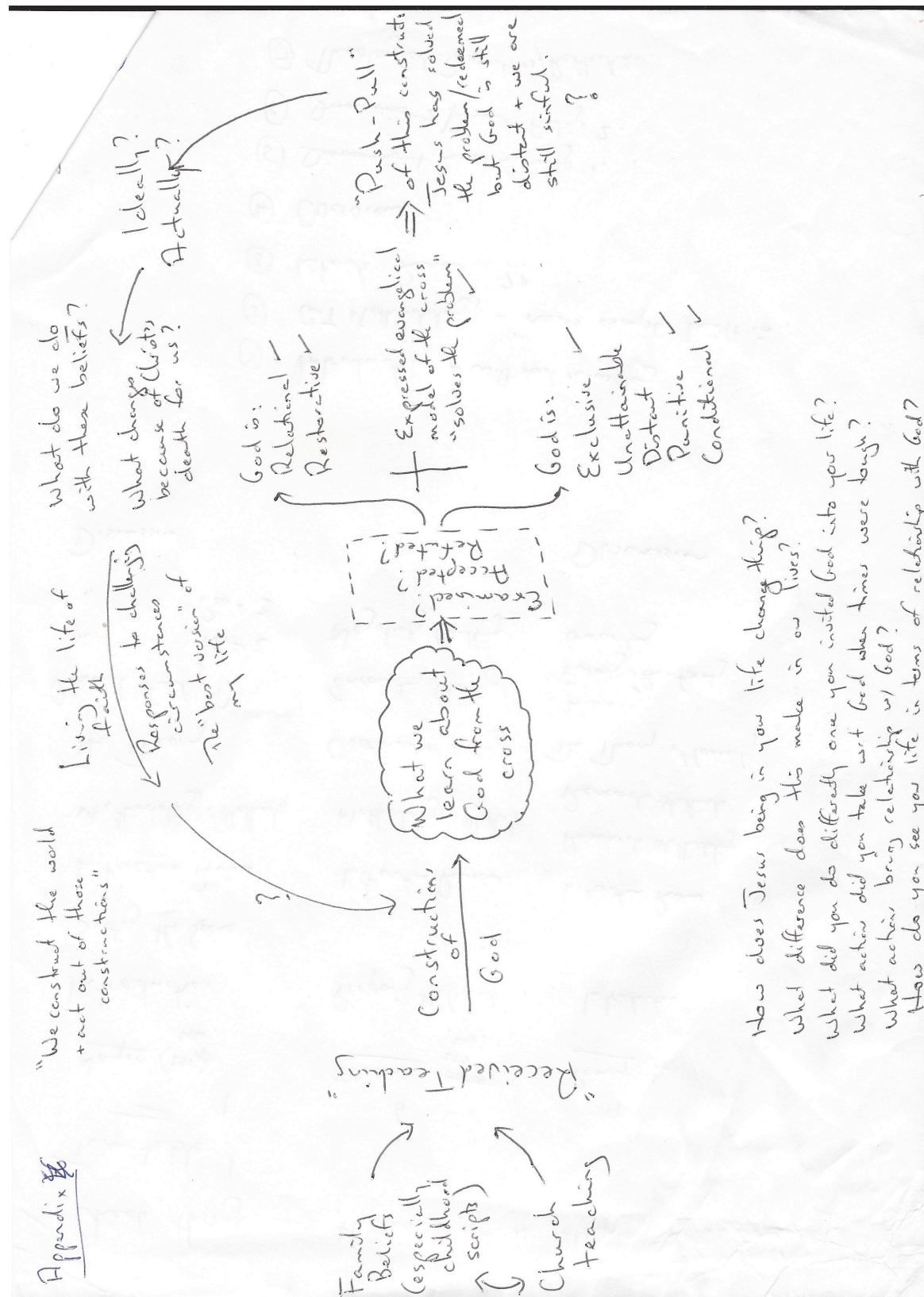
6/16/1 "I'm not bound by ticking a bunch of boxes on a tablet of ...this is what I've (Yeah, yeah) I now can actually live in the story and understand it, and be amazed by it or be disappointed by it or kind of chose whether I find out more about the cross or not....you know I have huge amount of freedom because of that event happening....."

6/16/3 "It means, technically, I can get away with anything, because my sins are forgiven in the past and the future (Yeah) But, because I believe in that....and it...that second stage after you go 'These are the technical things of Christianity or whatever rules and stuff I believe in,' after that it becomes personal, so for me I could get away with stuff, but I don't want to...like for me its changed how I want to live my life fundamentally to where I believe my life is way more aligned with God...I don't get everything right, but it kind of, I feel there's a freedom because I'm at least....I'm trying to understand how my life should connect with God and therefore how I should live that out (Yeah...) um, so there are times I'm still like 'Oh....had 5 glasses too much of wine at that wedding...got a little bit rowdy,' but, and that's not...I don't feel condemned by that, its just like, oohh...probably could've been...a bit more considerate of people or....(Sure) ...so it kind of just makes me think, 'Am I living the best version of my life? You know, is this what God created me to do? Is this the ultimate version of me?' (OK) 'Cos I now have this amazing God behind me, who I believe in (Yeah) You know...there's so much freedom in that...."

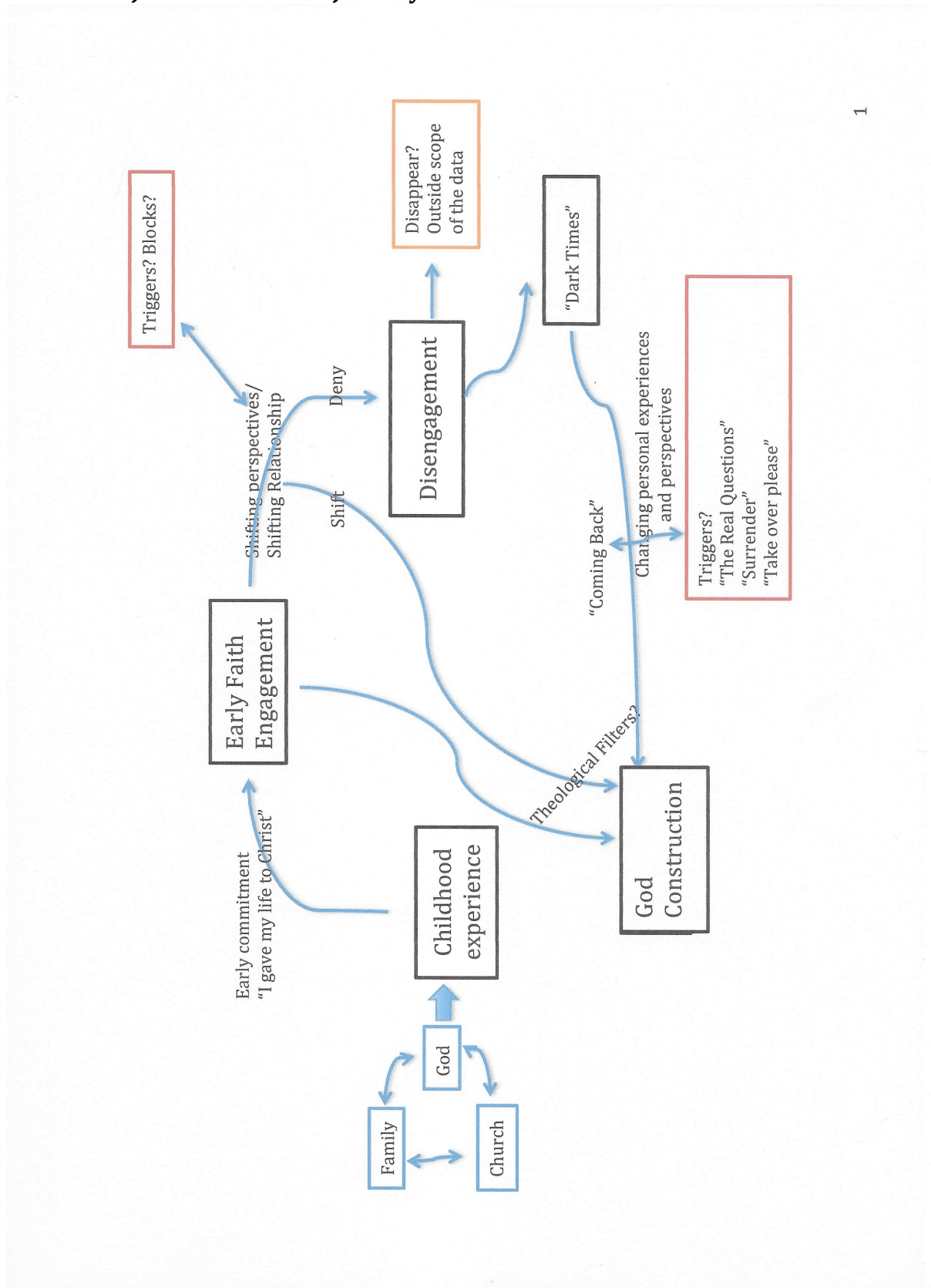
7/5/5 "So why did Jesus have to go and die on a cross?' and I don't know, for some reason I really struggle to explain it and I can give the answers that I've heard but I don't know, that doesn't, its not important to me anymore, it used to be important to me when I was trying to figure out...(Yeah, yeah) but its just that there's been this long process with me and God that, those details don't matter to me anymore because he's too real for me, so, yeah... (That's cool) Oh, its hard..."

8 Participant is in a very different space to other participants, seeing the cross as a relational work of God reaching into our human space in solidarity (my words) rather than solving some transactional problem.

# APPENDIX I: Developing Concepts

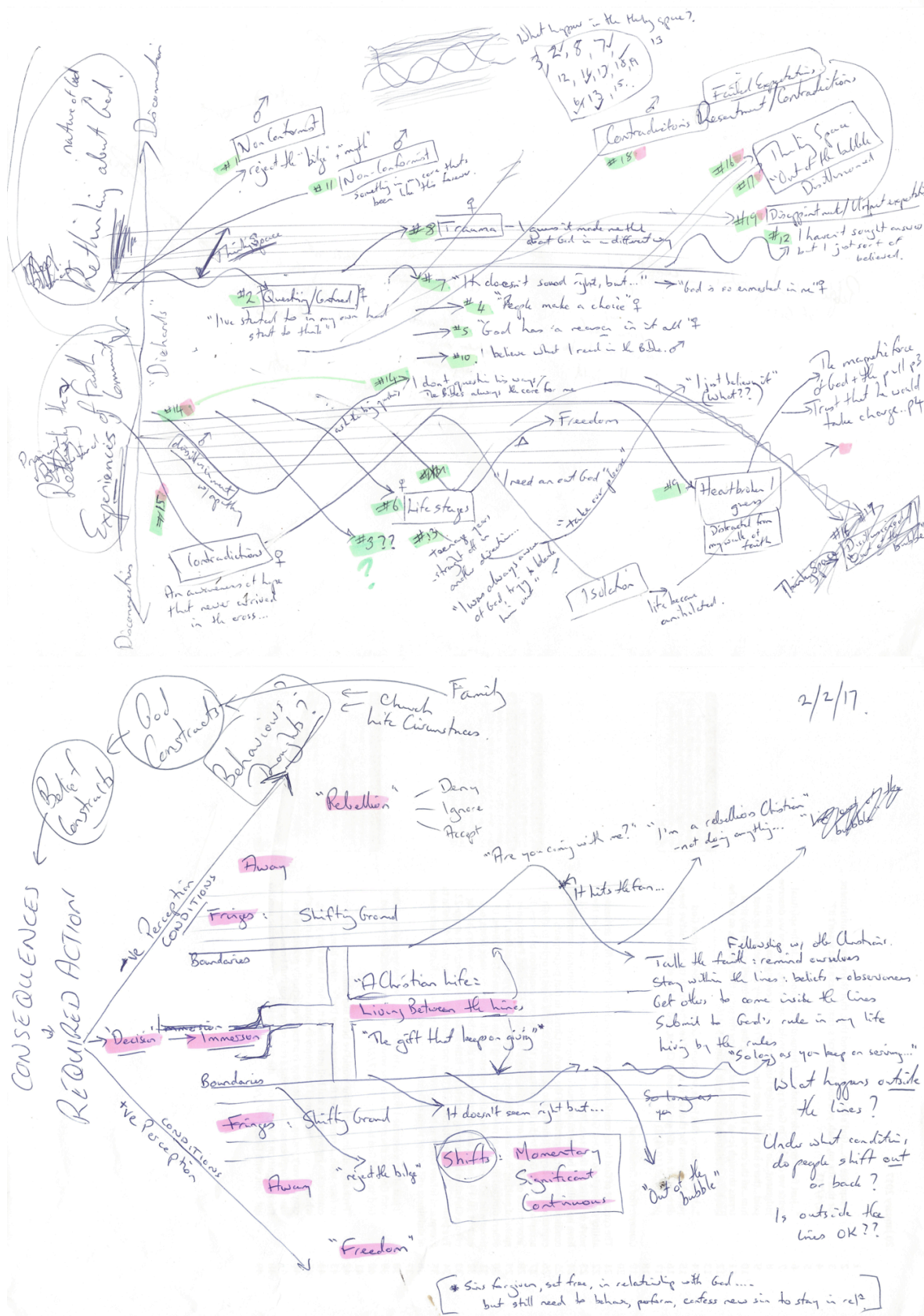


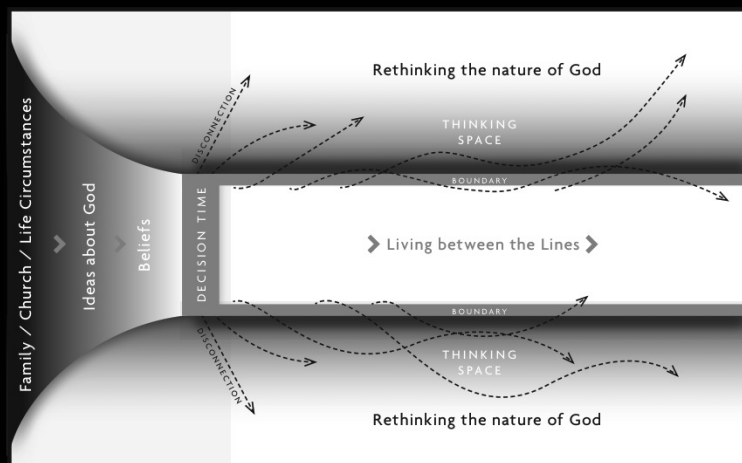
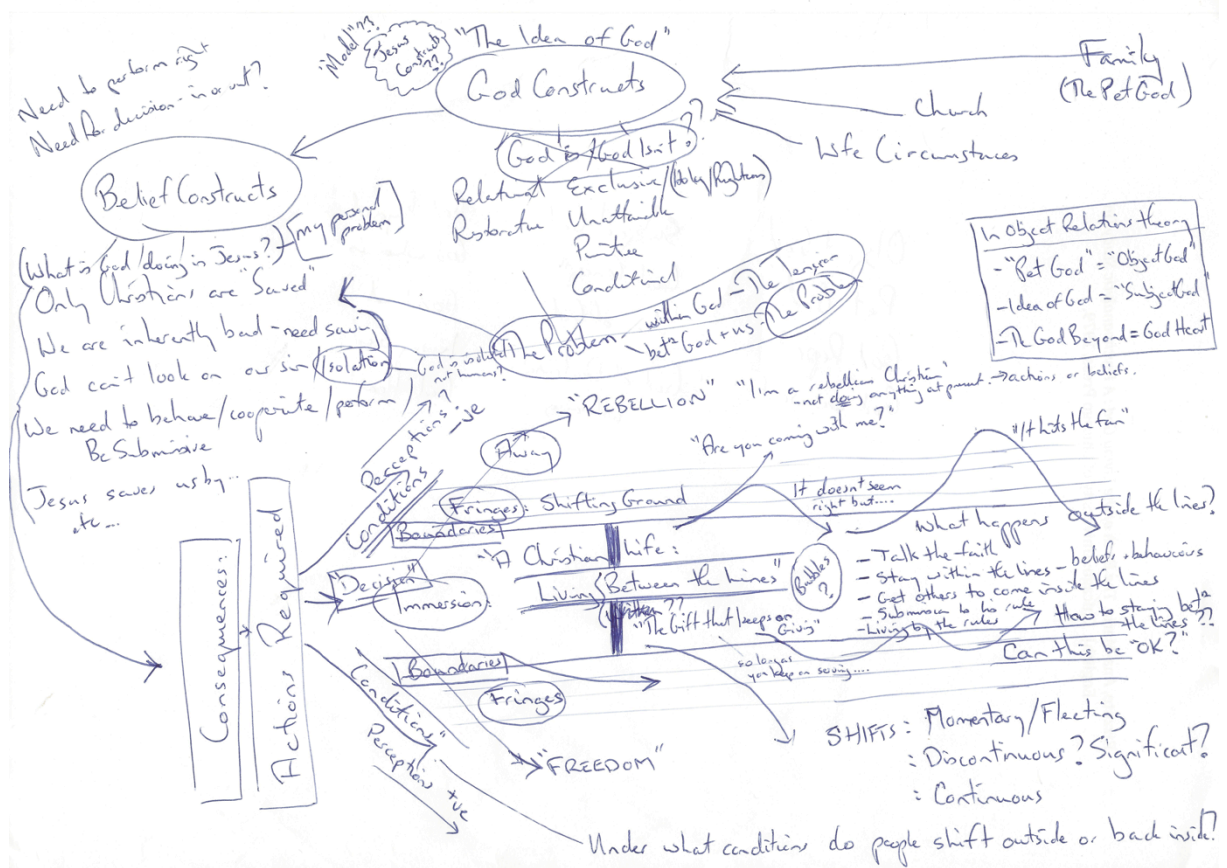
## APPENDIX J: The Atonement Journey





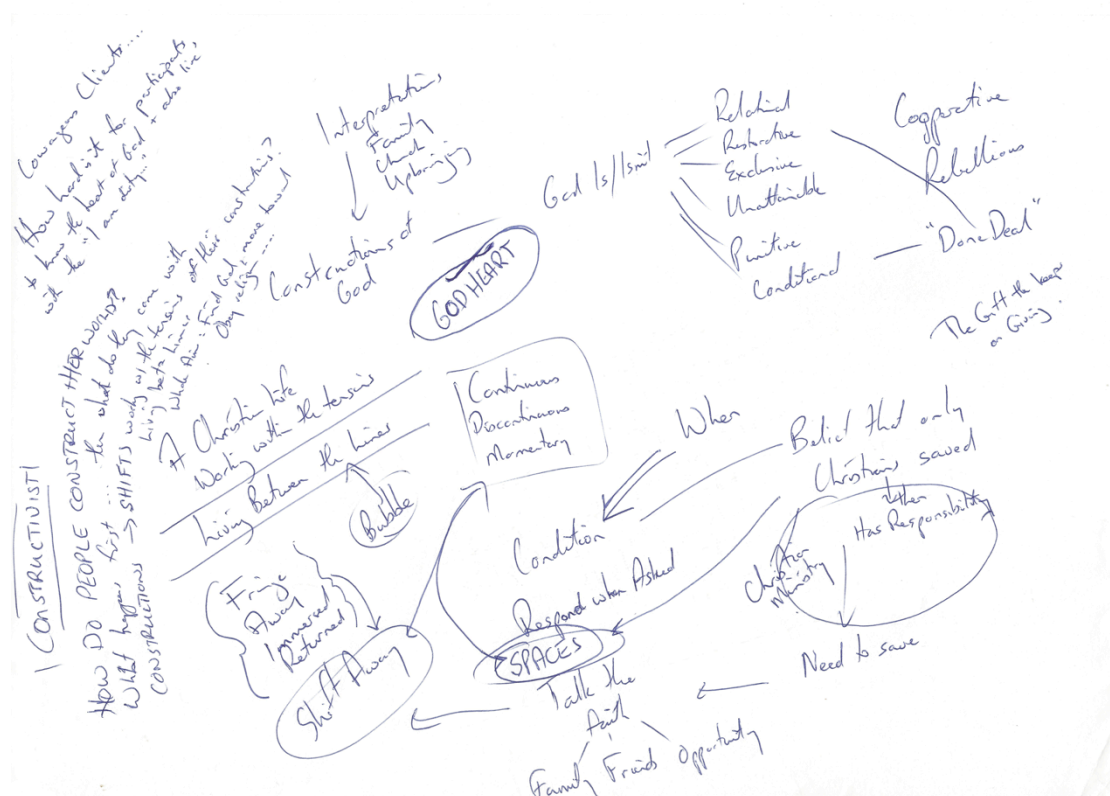
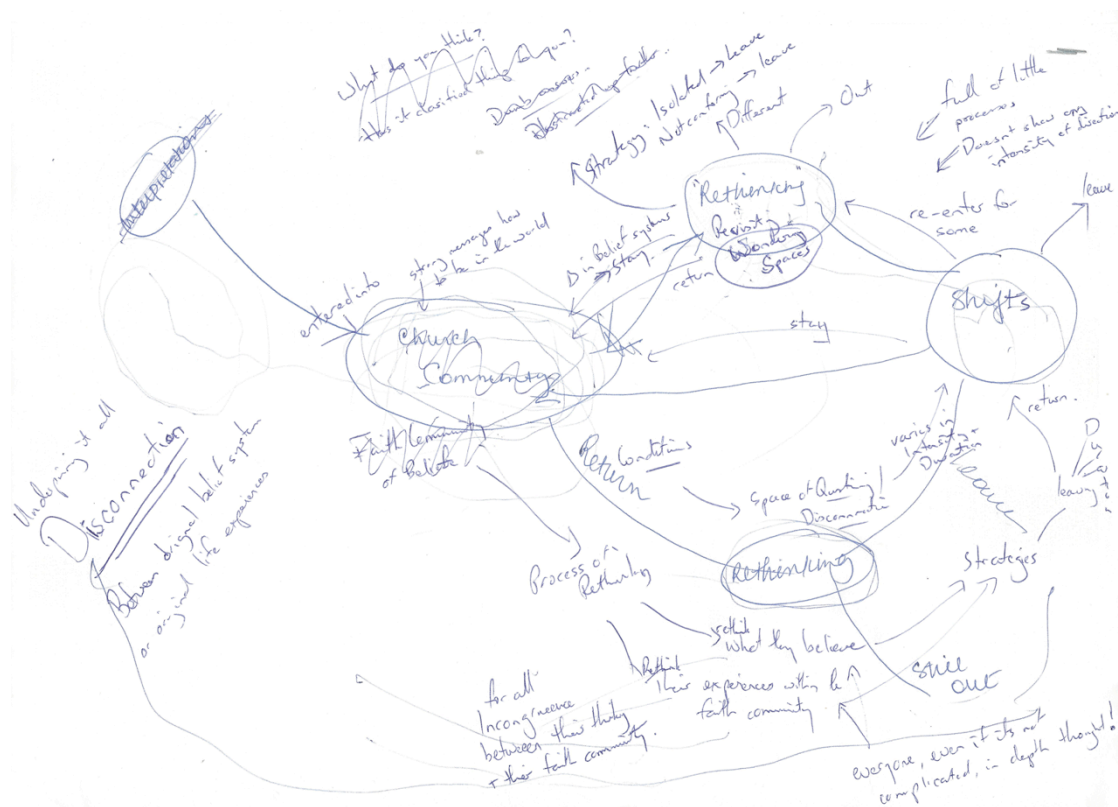
# APPENDIX K: Development of Living Between the Lines Schematic

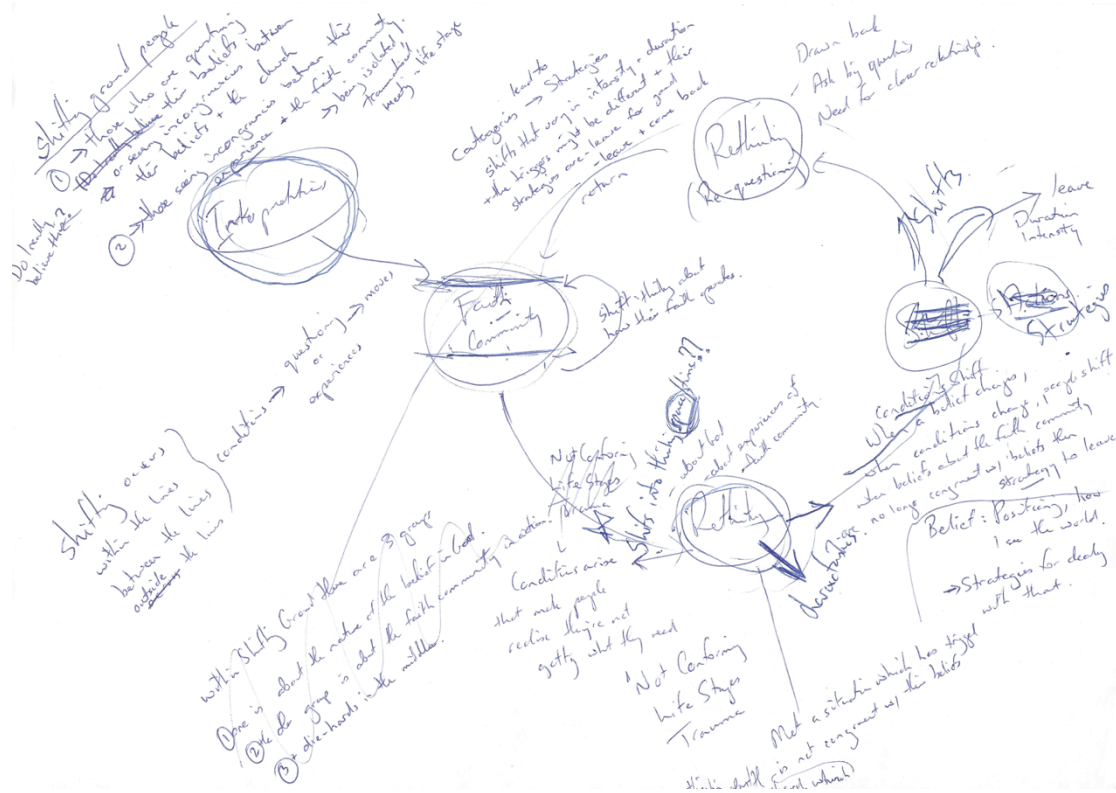
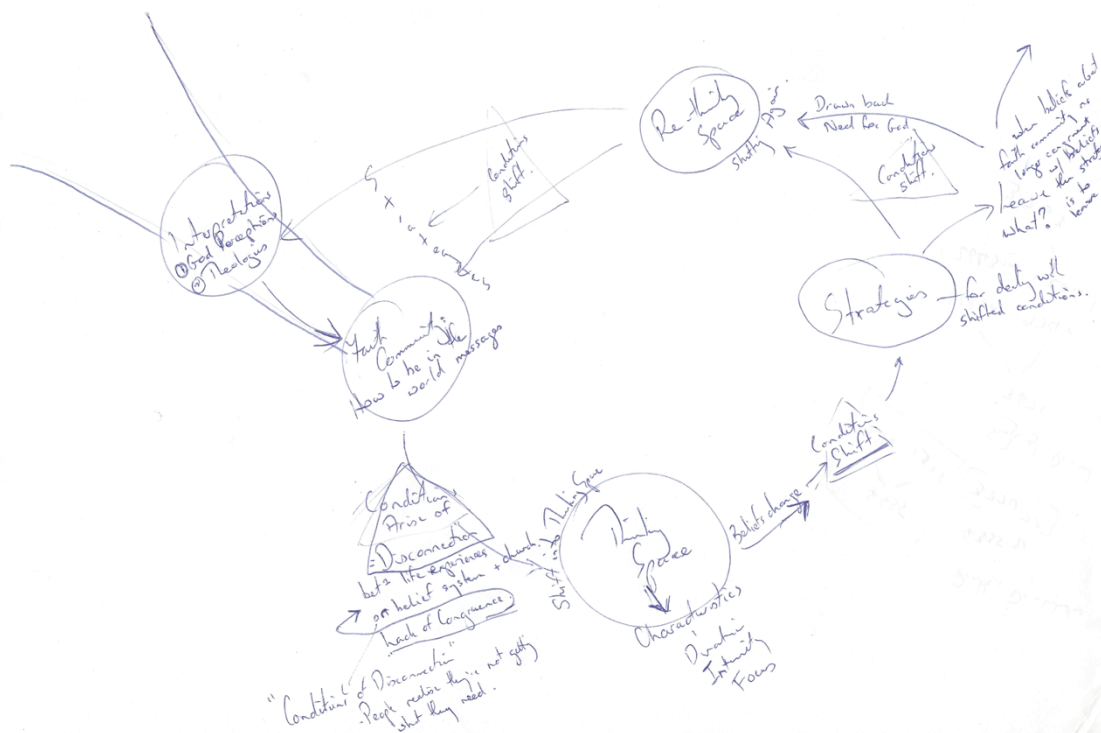






# APPENDIX L: Development of "Patterns in the Thinking Space" Schematic





**APPENDIX M: Development of Codes – Concepts – Categories  
for the theory “Living Across the Lines.”**

Initial Code examples	Focused Code examples	Concept	Sub-category	Category
Restoring relationship with God 2/1	Relationship	God is relational	Perspectives of God	Living between the lines
Remembering God being personal with me 7/5				
Comparing relationship with God with distant OT God 6/18				
God being just and good 5/3	A relationship free from rules			
Having freedom in God 6/16				
Contrasting ‘good news’ to a set of rules 6/7				
Understanding I’m loved by God 4/5	God is love			
Defining God as love 11/2				
Wanting people to feel the love of God and be free 6/19				
Being graciously forgiven 2/5	Forgiveness is mine	God is restorative		
Being forgiven for past and future sins 6/16				
Being righteous y asking for forgiveness 7/14				
Being approved by God because of Jesus dying for me 10/1	My fortunate state			
Being reconciled to God 3/5				
Feeling clothed with Jesus’ righteousness 7/1				
Being separated from God 2/3	The holiness of God	God is exclusive/ unattainable		
Having a strong focus on God’s holiness 2/14				
Being unable to be in relationship with sin 4/3				
Being unable to be in relationship with sin 4/3	Can’t enter his presence			
Being separated from God by his holiness 3/6				
Getting rid of the gap between a holy God and people 7/10				
Needing to punish sin 2/4	The need for justice	God is punitive		
Rejecting a view of God as all-loving 2/14				
Resonating with a legal model 5/6				
Failing to do and be 1/2	Needing punishment			
Deserving punishment 4/1				
Thinking about hell 5/18				
Praying for forgiveness 5/1	Ransomed healed restored forgiven	God is conditional		
Being reconciled to God 3/2				
Finding the peace of his presence 8/14				

Needing to 'seek hard' after God 5/14	Try to be good			
Trying to live in God's presence 4/5				
Needing to behave so God will be happy 4/5				
Being punished in our place 4/3	Only because of Jesus			
Being reconciled through Jesus breaking of the power of death 3/7				
Being like a gate to this relationship 9/5				
Being separated from God 5/3	Separation			
Being separated from God's presence by his holiness 3/6				
Falling short 4/1				
Receiving an eternity in hell 10/12	Bad consequences	The problem – the gulf between God and humanity		
Remembering father's presentation of hell 5/1				
Being in eternity without God 4/8				
Having a sinful and willful heart 4/1	The human state (in the wrong)			
Being broken 5/3				
Being born as self-seekers 3/6				
Making a decision 5/1	Decision time			
Coming to the Lord as an 8 year old 4/2				
Making a decision: In or out? 2/3				
Needing Jesus' death for her to experience new life 9/6	Jesus died for me	A personal problem		
Paying the penalty for what I deserve 10/1				
Taking the cross in my place 10/5				
Freedom from worry and regrets 6/6	Freedom for me			
Being free from worry 7/1				
Being free from the shame of my sin 7/1				
Alluding to hell for those not saved 5/18	In/Out			
Growing up believing that God was watching and judging 7/3				
Being concerned about where I go 10/15				
Being assured of forgiveness 5/12	Salvation for those who choose	An Exclusive solution		
Providing forgiveness to us all 4/2				
Accepting Jesus so the wrongs no longer matter 7/4				
Wanting desperately for family members to understand and be saved 4/8	Better get them in!			
Needing permission to be a caring friend instead of needing to convert her friends 7/12				
Needing to be more bold with people 10/13				

Being disciplined by God is him loving us 10/18	Discipline for your own good	The Cost of Following		
Wondering why things happen 4/7				
Seeing God as wanting to build her character 7/15				
Battling over letting go of my will so God's will prevails 5/15	Submitting to his rule over my life			
Being submissive to his rule over my life 9/14				
Trusting God to take control 10/17				
Being intimidated by looking after myself 5/13	Dying to self			
Choosing God is not smooth sailing 7/16				
Being responsible to pay back everything that's done for us 5/11				
Believing God not answering is for her own good 5/17	Trusting in the big plan			
Trusting God to do what's right 4/8				
Seeing the big picture makes sense of daily struggles 6/20				
Wanting to serve and contribute well 4/7	Living in response to the gift	Living faithfully	Staying between the lines	
Feeling in the right relationship by constantly approaching God 10/18				
Thinking about the best version of my life 6/16				
Being too rough to be commended by the church 3/2	Living on the edge	Non-conformity		
Being a bit rebellious 12/1				
Choosing to sin boldly 15/4				
Having different Christian feelings 12/5	Just a bit different			
Being in a different place 1/11				
Being uncomfortable with militarism in church 11/7				
Seeing herself as a prodigal as a young adult 9/2	Times of transition	Life Stages	Conditions for disconnection	Patterns in the Thinking Space
Trying to prove God wasn't real 6/2				
Hitting the teenage years and going in another direction 13/1				
Being upset breaking up with boyfriend 7/11	Disappointment with God	Unmet expectations		
Praying for stuff that God should give but doesn't 8/12				
Feeling let down and rebellious 19/5				
Questioning the role of church in our lifestyle 16/9	Being isolated	Isolation		
Being isolated and away from spiritual community 15/7				
Marrying a non Christian being unwise in hindsight 3/3	Hitting a wall	Crisis		
Realising it hadn't saved me 18/7				
Being aware of a hope that never arrived 15/4				

Coming back to faith at 22 6/1	Returning	Invitation	Conditions for Reconnection
Falling back on faith 2/9			
Saying 'you can come you know' 6/3	Welcoming back		
Going through inner turmoil 6/4	Crises	Crisis	
Getting out of a difficult marriage 9/3			
Asking God to help me 13/1			
Changing beliefs from childhood 2/2	Gently, gently	Intensity	Strategies for change
Being caught between beliefs 6/3			
Realising that's something's missing 7/15			
Finding those ideas don't sit comfortably 11/2	Steady goes it		
Blocking God out 13/1	Full blown change		
Getting very piggy 15/5			
Not wanting to serve at the moment 19/10			
Concept not coded, emerged as a way of conceptualizing...	the changes participants made	Duration	
Being outside a church environment 16/6	Changing faith	Focus	
Being a Christian but not serving 19/18			
Wondering how anyone can be married and not lose faith 9/4			
Knowing God is there and doing it anyway 15/5	Out of step		
Behaving differently to parents' and God's expectations 6/2			
Deciding to not accept the myth 1/4	Changing beliefs	The Thinking Space	
Making up her own mind 6/4			
Being uncertain where he stands on some issues 3/9			
Developing a new understanding 2/1	Faith changing – a new vision		
Not being black and white anymore 7/3			
Having new revelations 15/16			
Going nuts and giving it everything 19/6	Out there actions		
Actively living a life to prove I'm not a follower of Jesus 18/5			
Doing it worse than any of va! 15/4			

NB. There were more than three initial codes for most focused codes: I have chosen just a selection to illustrate the process of abstraction in moving from initial codes to focused codes to concepts to sub-categories and categories whilst trying to maintain a presentable format. This table also illustrates the grounding of the theory in the data. (Code: 3/4 means Participant 3, p.4 of transcript)

## APPENDIX N: Criteria for Rigor

*Does the researcher demonstrate skills in scholarly writing?*

Yes. I believe so, based on both my previous academic writing and the present doctoral research process. My writing has of course been checked and critiqued by my two supervisors, scholars in their fields, and been found acceptable. My regular reference to, quotation of, and acknowledgment of scholarly sources further indicates my own writing ability.

*Is there evidence that the researcher is familiar with grounded theory methods?*

I also believe this to be true, and I am certainly far more familiar now than I was when I first started reading about GTM four years ago. The evidence is contained both within the descriptions of GTM in this chapter and in the development of the theory resulting from carrying out the methods. I would not in any way say that I am an expert in GTM, but I am confident that I can, at last, claim familiarity with the methods.

*Has the researcher accessed and presented citations of relevant methodological resources?*

Yes, there are 145 footnotes citing fifty-four relevant resources that are listed within the Bibliography.

*Are limitations in the study design and research process acknowledged and addressed where possible?*

I trust that I have addressed some of limitations within this chapter. For clarity about these I will recall them again here. First, the study is limited by the nature of the participant group all being from middle class, large city, evangelical churches. It would have been interesting to be able to extend the study to include other than evangelical churches, although this limitation resulted from my personal interest in the theology of evangelicals. However, it would have also been useful to have extended the study to incorporate a wider range of participants from different socioeconomic, ethnic and geographic locations. Second, I found the timing of my interviews made it difficult to always carry out constant comparative analysis as I found that at times I was busy interviewing and transcribing with little time for analysis. Long breaks between series of interviews were difficult in some ways as they took me away from the data, but also provided the opportunity for reflection, that was useful each time I returned to analysis. I believe I reached a point of saturation with the number of participants I interviewed, but I also wonder whether more participants could potentially have provided further, different data. I suspect this would be true if I had been able to extend the range of participants as suggested above.

*Has the researcher articulated their philosophical position?*

Yes, I have addressed this in section 3.3.1 above.

*Is grounded theory an appropriate research strategy for the stated aims of the study?*

Yes I believe it is. GTM is suggested as a suitable methodology where there is little extant research, and that was true in this case. GTM has the stated goal of generating theory from data, and my intention was to listen to the stories of participants to see what they would say about their understanding of the atonement. GTM has provided a methodology and appropriate methods for achieving that aim.

*Do the outcomes of the research achieve the stated aims?*

Yes and no. The first part of the research question was answered, as it became clear that specific atonement beliefs did not impact on participants' experiences of life. The second research question was therefore not explored, but, as is the emergent nature of GTM, the research went on to explore the data that was presented by participants.

*Is a grounded theory presented as the end product of the research?*

Yes, a substantive grounded theory<sup>1</sup>: "A Christian life: Living Across the Lines."

*Are philosophical and methodological inconsistencies identified and addressed?*

As far as possible I have tried to stay within the description of the philosophical and methodological approaches to constructivist grounded theory as I understand them. As is mentioned elsewhere, the timing of interviews did at times make constant comparative analysis a challenge. I acknowledge also that my memo writing was perhaps not as strong as it might have been.

*Is there evidence that the researcher has employed memoing in support of the study?*

To some extent. I set up a system for recording memos formally in a file on my computer and aimed to write a memo after each interview as a starting point. I then wrote a number of memos during the early stages of analysis about emerging codes and concepts. Some of these are included as excerpts above and a number were formative in the early development of concepts. In the later stages of analysis this system fell by the wayside as I found that I preferred jotting ideas on paper and drawing as a way of connecting my insights. Although not the sort of record of memos that I understand more advanced researchers might keep, this was a helpful process for me.

*Has the researcher indicated the mechanisms by which an audit trail was maintained?*

Wherever I have presented a code or concept it has always been grounded in the interview transcript materials and referenced with the system (Participant/page/paragraph) so that the source material can be identified. In the descriptions of developing concepts, I also relied heavily on the data, and included data using the same referencing system, primarily so that I could find my way back to the data. In all material in the upcoming "Findings" chapters, quotes from participants will always be referenced back to the original transcripts in order to show the authenticity of those quotes. I have kept both hard and digital copies of all interviews, plus the original Consent forms from participants, and after examination of the thesis these will be securely stored.

*Are procedures described for the management of data and resources?*

The most important data in this research is that of participants' interviews. Participants were given assurances that everything possible would be done to protect their anonymity, as was required by the University of Otago ethics approval process. To this end, participants were given the opportunity to remove any material in the transcripts that they did not want included, and the transcripts were further de-identified by removal of participant names. Other names, places and institutions were also changed. Following submission of the thesis, the original electronic files of interviews will be

---

<sup>1</sup> Substantive theory is "produced for the purpose of understanding a tangible phenomenon in a clearly defined situation...*Formal* grounded theory on the other hand, is theory developed to a higher conceptual level." Birks and Mills, *Grounded Theory*, 156.



deleted from my computer as will the interview transcripts. A hard copy and a USB memory stick containing interview materials will be retained in a locked cabinet.

*Is there evidence that the researcher has applied the essential grounded theory methods appropriately in the context of the study described?*

I trust that in the course of this chapter I have described the application of the essential methods used in this study.

*Does the researcher make logical connections between the data and abstractions?*

I find this an interesting question, and in practice found the task of abstracting from data to be one of the most difficult aspects of GTM. Most of my previous training and experience has been looking for detail and patterns in the detail, and so developing higher levels of abstraction was largely counter-intuitive. Moving from codes to conceptual properties made sense but conceptualizing from concepts to categories at times seemed less 'logical.' If logical is understood as "reasonable" or "commonsense" then I hope that the development of the theory as I describe it is logical.

*Is there evidence that the theory is grounded in the data?*

Yes, the evidence is that all codes, concepts and categories presented are supported by quotes from participants showing that the interview data provided the source material for all aspects of the theory. I have attempted to provide source material for all claims made. Though in places only one or two quotes have been included, many more could have been, but were omitted for the sake of space, and to not clutter the theory with excessive data.

*Is the final theory credible? Are potential applications examined and explored?*

I believe it to be a credible theory. When I have presented the theory to others, they have quickly understood what it presents. This has included a number of individuals and also an informal presentation to the GT discussion group at Auckland University of Technology. This group has been an important part of my GTM learning, and when I was able to present the theory to the group it was met with comprehension and recognition, despite the fact that the group is a GT group and not a theology discussion group. The theory makes sense and is believable. In the final chapter I consider potential applications in terms of what the theory means to the church and to the lives of Christians who are living both inside, outside and across the lines.